MIDDLE EAST@WAR 52

AIR POWER AND THE ARAB WORLD

1909–1955

VOLUME 7: THE ARAB AIR FORCES IN CRISIS, APRIL 1941–DECEMBER 1942

Dr David Nicolle &
Air Vice Marshal Gabr Ali Gabr

MIDDLE EAST @ WAR
SERIES

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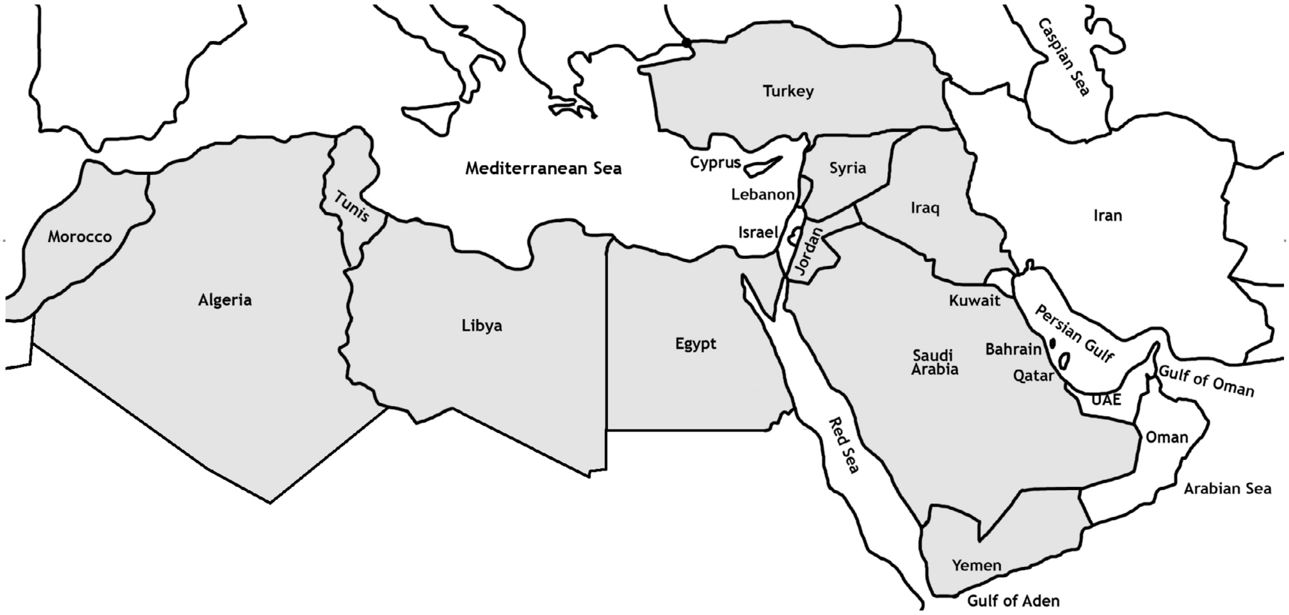

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DEDICATION

For Air Commodore Abd al-Moneim Miqaati (8 July 1904 – 5 April 1982)
in memory of a meeting in Groppi's in 1970.

The *Bash-Shawish* marched to the door, turned with his hand on the latch and, drawing himself up yet more stiffly, said; 'You'll get on very well with the English if you remember two things. Always do what they tell you and don't ask questions. Questions make them excited. Never hit an Englishman because the law of their country forbids them to hit back. You may think that unmanly but there is it. Understood?' (Laurence Thompson, *A Time to Laugh*, London 1953)

INTRODUCTION

THE ARABS AND THE ALLIED STRUGGLE

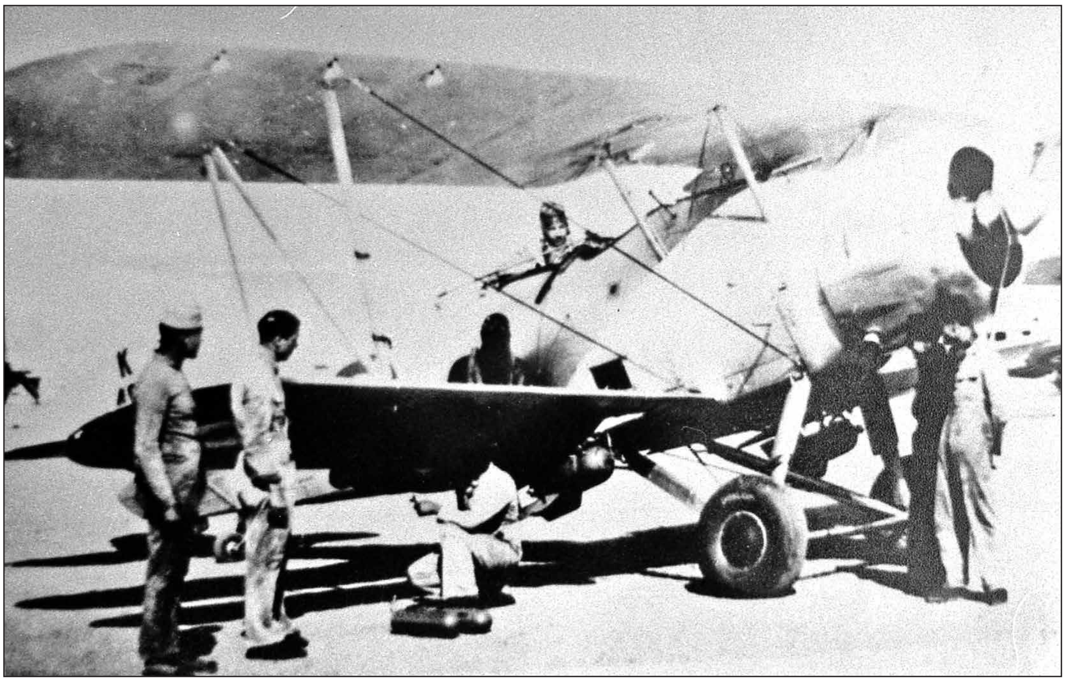
Egypt

During the tumultuous year from June 1941 to July 1942, it sometimes looked as if Britain would lose the North African Campaign although by the end of 1942, the balance had tipped decisively the other way. Meanwhile, the winter of 1941–42 saw Egypt slip towards economic as well as political crisis, accompanied by shortages of food and increasing prices. The number of British and Allied troops in the country contributed to a strain on food resources so, to deal with this emergency, about 200,000 acres of land previously used for growing cotton – Egypt's main source of revenue – was changed to the growing of food.

Some events of 1942 serve to highlight both the tensions and the way in which various sides reacted to them. For example, on 6 January 1942, the British ambassador in Cairo demanded that Prime Minister Husain Sirry Pasha suspend diplomatic relations with the Vichy government of France. This Sirry did, but unfortunately he failed to inform King Faruq before doing so. In fact, at the time, the King was on a tour of inspection in the Eastern Desert region between the Nile and the Red Sea.

On his return to Cairo, the King was furious and accused Sirry Pasha's Foreign Minister, Salih Sami Pasha, of acting beyond his authority. This resulted in Sami Pasha's resignation, closely followed by that of the Finance Minister. When he was unable to find suitable successors, Prime Minister Sirry believed that his own authority had been undermined – which may have been King Faruq's intention in the first place. The King certainly tried to take political advantage of this situation, which infuriated the British ambassador who in turn used it to manipulate matters to Britain's advantage.

The gunner of a REAF Westland Lysander, probably from No. 1 Squadron during, rather than before, the Second World War. (EAF Museum collection)



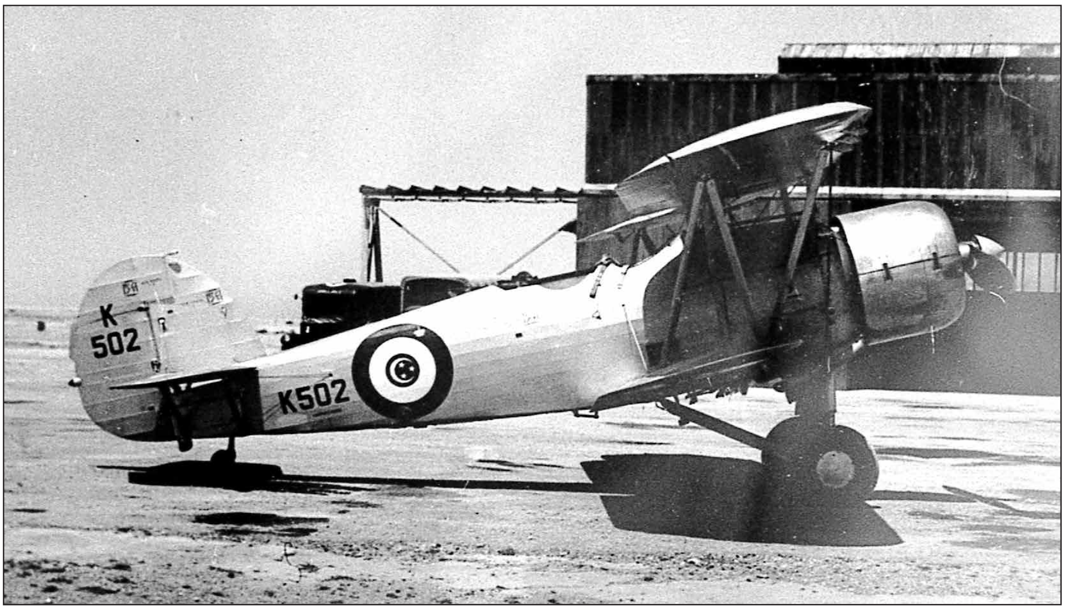
Bombs being attached to one of the REAF's first batch of Hawker Egyptian Audaxes. These outdated machines continued to be used for training purposes at squadron level and in the REAF's FTS, well into the Second World War. (EAF Museum collection)

On 21 January 1942, General Erwin Rommel launched a successful counter-offensive against the British in Libya and by the end of that month, Axis forces were again at Benghazi. These German and Italian successes in the North African Campaign, plus the even more remarkable, or at least unexpected, Japanese successes against British Imperial forces in south-east Asia, encouraged what the British interpreted as pro-Axis street demonstrations by some students in Egypt.

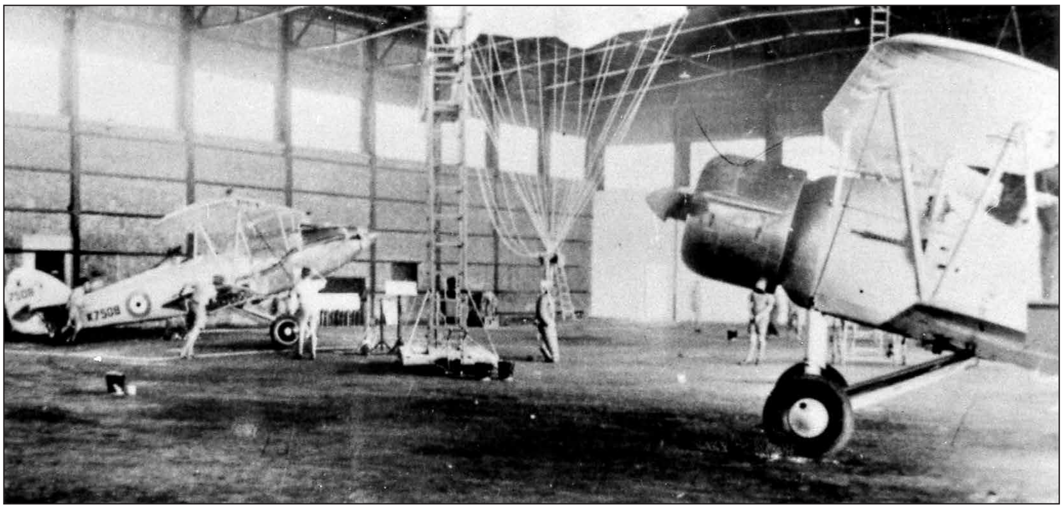
On 2 February 1942, Husain Sirry's government fell and two days later, on the night of 4 February, British tanks and troops surrounded King Faruq's Abdin Palace in the very heart of Cairo. Sir Miles Lampson, the British ambassador, thereupon demanded that the Egyptian King appoint a government headed by Mustafa Nahas of the Wafd Party. Once again, British and Egyptian perceptions of events were almost diametrically opposed. Whilst the former believed they were simply doing what was necessary to secure their base-area while engaged in a life-or-death struggle against Axis forces in the desert, most of the latter concluded that British promises not to interfere in Egyptian internal affairs, were worthless. A belief that became deep-seated and would remain so up to the Egyptian coup or revolution of 1952.

On the other hand, elections in March 1942 were a clear victory for Nahas and the Wafd Party. With the war going badly for them in the Western Desert, the British now pressured the Egyptian authorities to place the former Prime Minister, Ali Mahir of the Sa'adist Party under strict surveillance. In late May, the Wafd Party went through an internal crisis of its own but Nahas was nevertheless confirmed as the new Prime Minister. On 24 June, Axis forces under General Rommel crossed into Egypt in pursuit of the retreating British and headed for Alexandria. At this point, many in Egypt – including many in the army and the REAF – really did believe that Britain was about to lose the war. Therefore, these men set about doing what they thought was necessary, to save Egypt from a coming cataclysm.

The military situation would then change dramatically at the First and Second Battles of al-Alamain (1 to 27 July and 23 October to 4 November 1942). The Germans and Italians were soundly defeated, after which they were steadily forced back to Tunisia before being expelled from North Africa altogether on 13 March 1943. Thereafter, the Allied prospects altered fundamentally and along with this shift, attitudes in Egypt also changed, as it became clear that Britain and her friends would win. Egyptians also began to look towards a post-war situation in which the British Empire would be a much-reduced power in a world now dominated by the USA and the USSR. However, how many Egyptians realised the British Empire would cease to exist within a generation, is a different matter.



The REAF's older Hawker Egyptian Audaxes were transferred to the Flying Training School at Almaza during the Second World War. They were then used as advanced trainers and seemingly retained their original silver doped finish, as seen on this example (number K502). (Author's collection)



The fact that the Hawker Egyptian Audax on the right, which is under maintenance alongside an RAF Audax Mk. 1 on the left (K7508), is still silver dope overall, suggests that it was part of the REAF's FTS, not of No. 4 Squadron (Author's collection)

Iraq

After inflicting a significant defeat upon the Italian Army in North Africa and pushing into the Italian colony of Cyrenaica, the British found that the tables had turned during the spring of 1941. German land and air reinforcements first stabilised the situation for the Axis powers in North Africa and then pushed the British back across the Egyptian frontier. The balance of fortunes had similarly shifted in the Balkans. Next and seemingly out of the blue, trouble erupted in supposedly pro-British Iraq. Here, Churchill's attitude towards the country and the language he used, had already undermined the position of Britain's remaining friends within the upper echelons of the Iraqi political system.

Within Iraq, Prince Abd Ilah, the Regent, had persuaded rival politicians to form a coalition government headed by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) who would be Prime Minister from 31 March 1940 until 3 February 1941. The British were unhappy about this political compromise, even though the senior 'pro-British' politicians, Nuri al-Sa'id and Taha al-Hashimi, were included as Foreign Minister and Minister of Defence respectively. Meanwhile, Rashid al-Gaylani (Kaylani)'s continuing refusal to declare war on Germany clearly irked Winston Churchill who was installed as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom on 10 May 1940.

By now, the so-called Golden Square of senior Iraqi military officers were making their dislike of Nuri al-Sa'id increasingly clear. Furthermore, some junior officers had reportedly refused to obey orders from Taha al-Hashimi, the Iraqi Minister of Defence. With increasing frustration and perhaps even some political desperation, Prince Abd al-Ilah, the Regent, wanted Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) to resign as Prime Minister but the latter refused. Instead, al-Gaylani (Kaylani) turned to the leading figure in the Golden Square of senior officers, Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh for support. Fearing another military coup, the Regent now backed down and for a while, there was a tense calm as more dramatic events unfolded in North Africa. It was here, in March 1941, German and Italian forces under General Erwin Rommel, rolled back the previously victorious British, Commonwealth and Imperial forces.

The next episode was more dramatic and came in the form of what the British called, the Rashid Ali Rebellion; more properly known as the Anglo-Iraq War of May 1941. In this brief but hard-fought campaign, the British Empire was victorious. Following this, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) and his close associates who were able to do so, fled the country. The victorious British attempted to take control of Baghdad but initially, were not very successful as the Iraqi capital suffered a widespread collapse of law and order. There was considerable rioting and looting, some of it directed against the Baghdad's substantial Jewish community which had been there since the very foundation of the city in 762 AD. Over 100 people were reportedly killed and around 850 injured before the Iraqi Police restored order, sometimes by using live ammunition.

Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) and his ally Muhammad Amin al-Husaini, the exiled Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, fled to Iran. From there they travelled to Turkey, Italy and finally Germany where Hitler declared that Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) was head of what the Nazis and their allies recognised as an Iraqi 'government in exile'. Mahmud Salman al-Janabi, the CO of the RIrAF, appears not to have attempted to follow al-Gaylani (Kaylani) and was therefore, soon handed over to the British. Within a few days of the collapse of the so-called Iraqi 'Revolt', the Regent, Prince Abd al-Ilah, returned to the country and appointed the veteran Jamil al-Midfa'i as Prime Minister on 4 June. However, he would resign on 10 October. In his place, the Regent now appointed Nuri al-Sa'id and together they pursued a policy of 'moderate nationalism' while taking pains to maintain good relations with the British and their allies.

For its part, the British government still feared that Nazi Germany might inflict further defeats upon the Soviet Union and in doing so, would be able to break through the Caucasus towards Soviet Azerbaijan or worse still, to the oil fields of Iran. British – and more particularly British Imperial forces in Iraq – were therefore, strengthened to 22 brigades by 1942 whilst the existing Iraqi forces were kept under strict surveillance, if not direct supervision. In the light of recent events, it is hardly surprising that Nuri al-Sa'id also mistrusted his own country's armed forces. Furthermore, he showed himself both ruthless and highly manipulative, presiding over a political system which blatantly benefitted a few Sunni Arab families. Thus, despite his own military background, Nuri al-Sa'id came to be seen as neglecting Iraq's armed forces, including the RIrAF.

Other Arab Lands

Whereas the Kingdoms of Egypt and Iraq were theoretically independent and, at least until the final months of the conflict, neutral during the Second World War, some other Arab peoples were genuinely independent and neutral; Saudi Arabia and Yemen managing to remain both. Elsewhere in the Arab World, most indigenous peoples were colonial subjects of a belligerent power – Britain, France and Italy – or of Spain which remained a neutral power. Others were the inhabitants of protected states such as the Gulf Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman (under British protection) or Morocco (under French protection). Syria and Lebanon were in yet another position, having been allowed some degree of independence by France (the mandate power which governed them) before the outbreak of war.

Of the few genuinely independent, neutral Arab states, only Saudi Arabia had any sort of operational air force of its own but during the course of the Second World War, this virtually, ceased to exist. Like Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of Yemen declared its neutrality at the outbreak of the conflict, despite having recently renewed its treaty with Italy. This did not stop the British fearing ongoing Italian influence and propaganda within an independent Yemen which lay immediately north of the British-ruled, or at least British-dominated, Aden Protectorate and the strategically vital port of Aden itself. Is it also reasonable to assume that the King-Imam of Yemen had more than a passing sympathy for the Axis powers, as their victory would probably have resulted in the British being expelled from southern Arabia.

1

THE ANGLO-IRAQ WAR (MAY 1941)

Towards the end of March 1941, Prince Abd al-Ilah tried to reduce the influence of the Golden Square and asked Taha al-Hashimi to form a new Iraqi government. However, the Golden Square of Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh, Kamil Shabib, Fahmi Sa'id and Mahmud Salman al-Janabi responded in a prompt and decisive manner. On the night of 1/2 April 1941, they led the Iraqi Army's 1 Division in the military coup which Regent Abd al-Ilah had feared. They were supported in this by Major-General Amin Zaki, the Acting Chief of the Iraqi General Staff. As a result, Prime Minister Taha al-Hashimi was forcibly replaced by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) (al-Kailani) who now proclaimed himself head of a Government of National Defence, on 4 April.

As an ardent nationalist who had always opposed the British domination of his country, al-Gaylani (Kaylani) now adopted an even more nationalist and indeed, anti-British position. While Iraq's child-king, Faisal II, remained the nominal head of state, his uncle, Prince Abd al-Ilah, fled to Basra where had boarded the British warship, *HMS Cockchafer* and was taken to Transjordan. This much smaller country was ruled by another member of the Hashemite dynasty, the Amir Abdulluh. In Transjordan, Prince Abd al-Ilah met the ousted Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Sa'id and both stayed there as guests of Amir Abdulluh until the British crushed the so-called, Rashid Ali Rebellion. Meanwhile in Iraq itself, the Prince's

Iraqi Army Fiat Ansaldo CV.33 tankettes on parade before the Anglo-Iraqi War, reportedly early in 1941. (Albert Grandolini collection)

role as regent was for a while, filled by Sharif Sharaf, a deeply religious but aged relative of the child-king.

Upon taking over as Prime Minister, al-Gaylani (Kaylani) declared he intended to remove the remaining British military bases from Iraq. However, in the current critical phase of the Second World War, the British were not prepared to allow this to happen and consequently refused to recognise Iraq's new government. Iraq remained, in British eyes, a vital link in the British Empire's chain of communications, most especially its military and civil air-routes. For Winston Churchill, the very survival of his beloved empire was at stake. Getting a negative response from the British and expecting a violent reaction to their own military preparations, the new Iraqi leadership almost inevitably, turned to Italy and Germany for support – both of whom showed themselves willing and eager to help. In fact, the Germans promptly started to think in terms of an airlift to take military supplies to Iraq.

Meanwhile, British and Iraqi forces had been watching each other warily since the day of the coup. In fact, on the day of the coup, the British in Basra reported that three of their aeroplanes had flown one of their daily reconnaissance sorties over the western end of the Persian Gulf. They also stated that there were currently 50 British aircraft available in Iraq. The Iraqi coup would immediately change the RAF's priorities in the area although there remained the possibility of Axis submarines operating in the Gulf.

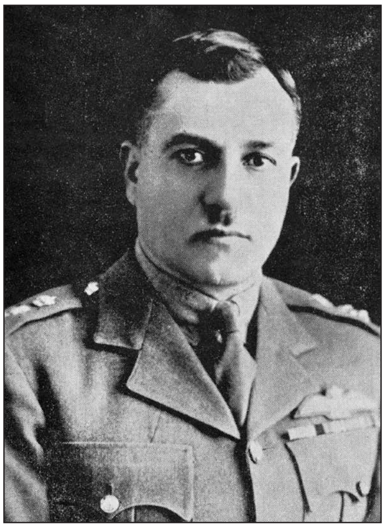
On the following day, 2 April 1941, the British took control of Basra airport and sent a message to Iraqi forces in southern Iraq, ordering them to withdraw from Basra town within one month – 2 May being the final deadline. British reinforcements were also hurried to the nearby RAF air-base at Shaibah. On 3 April, all British personnel seconded to the RIrAF were ordered to return to duty with the RAF. There currently seem to have been around nine such men, including three pilots, Adams, Pitcher and Bithell. The rest were technical specialists. Some of these men were nearing the ends of their contracts but others, such as Warrant Officer C.W. Liversidge, would have been expecting to remain in post for several more months. In fact, Liversidge's contract with the Iraqi Air Force was not due to expire until 23 August 1941.

Within a few days, the British were receiving intelligence about RIrAF movements. For example, on 4 April a report from Baghdad noted that 15 aircraft carrying bombs had 'proceeded over or at Diwaniya today'. Such intelligence reports were eagerly read because the main RAF base in Iraq, at Habbaniya, was a training establishment and was not fully equipped to face a threat on its very doorstep. In fact, the British aeroplanes in Iraq largely consisted of assorted training machines plus a very small number of obsolete fighters and bombers. Furthermore, there were only 39 pilots qualified to fly them. It would clearly take time to get any reinforcements to Habbaniya although Shaibah in the south could be supplied by sea once the British had taken control of the port and city of Basra.

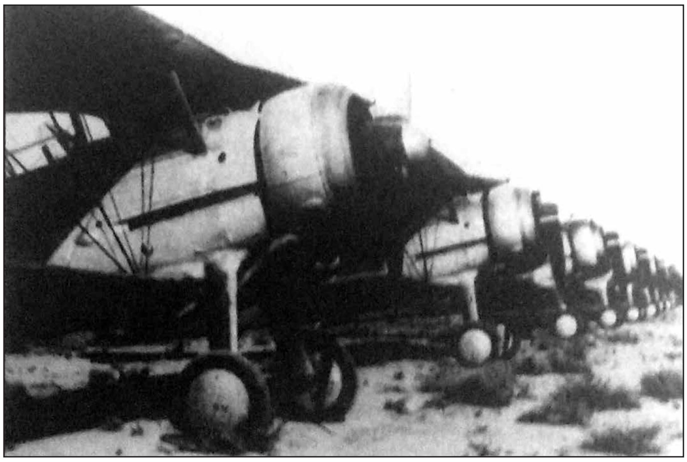
The Iraqi De Havilland Dragon Rapide YI-HDA had been registered to the Baghdad Aeroplane Society on 25th July 1938. But in this photograph, the writing on its nose translates as "Airlines of Iraqi Aviation Association" which was either the correct name of the Baghdad Aeroplane Society or was the new name of the same organization. Here it is seen with members of the Iraqi Army or Air Force, perhaps around the time that the machine was transferred to the RIrAF. (Iraqi Air Force archive)

A Savoia-Marchetti SM.79 of the RIrAF with its engines running as the pilot prepares to take off and one of the groundcrew runs to removes the chocks. (Albert Grandolini collection)

Having briefly commanded the RIrAF Air Force from 18th June to 2nd November 1936, Za'im (Brig.) Khalid Mahmud al-Zahawi would be placed in command once again following the collapse of the so-called "Rashid Ali al-Khaylani Rebellion" in 1941. However, this was only a temporary appointment. (Iraqi Air Force)



Lt. Col. Mahmud Salman al-Janabi, the Commander of the RIrAF, was a member of the "Golden Square" of senior officers who launched a coup at the start of April 1941 and instilled Rashid Ali al-Khaylani as Iraq's new Prime Minister. This was followed by the brief Anglo-Iraqi War, after which al-Janabi was executed. (Author's collection)



The only reasonably modern fighters possessed by the RIrAF during the Anglo-Iraqi War of 1941 were Gloster Gladiators, operated by a single fighter squadron. (Ahmad Sadik collection)

On 6 April 1941, there was further news from the Balkans – disturbing for the British but encouraging for the new Iraqi government. Here, German forces had started their invasion of Greece in support of their battered ally, Italy, whose own invasion had proved a military disaster. At this point, it appeared to many people across the world, including in the Middle East, as if the vast British Empire was destined to fall.

The following day, the RAF received another somewhat confusing intelligence report suggesting that three of the RIrAF's Vincents were going to fly to the RAF base at Shaibah under Hamid Ammar, who was reportedly the CO of the 'Vincent Squadron'. In fact, Hamid Ammar was CO on No. 1 Squadron whilst what had been the Independent Vincent Flight, was by then, integrated into No. 2 Squadron This source also claimed that only three of the RIrAF's 'Northrops' (meaning the Douglas 8A-4 dive-bombers) were currently serviceable.

Despite being advised against taking immediate military action by Sir Archibald Wavell, the British Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, Winston Churchill opted to follow the very different council offered by Sir Claude Auchinleck, the British Commander-in-Chief in India. As a result, on 8 April 1941, the British Indian Army was instructed to send troops to Basra. Delighted by this order, Auchinleck had the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade, plus a regiment of the 10th Indian Division which were already at sea, rerouted from its original destination of Malaya to Iraq.

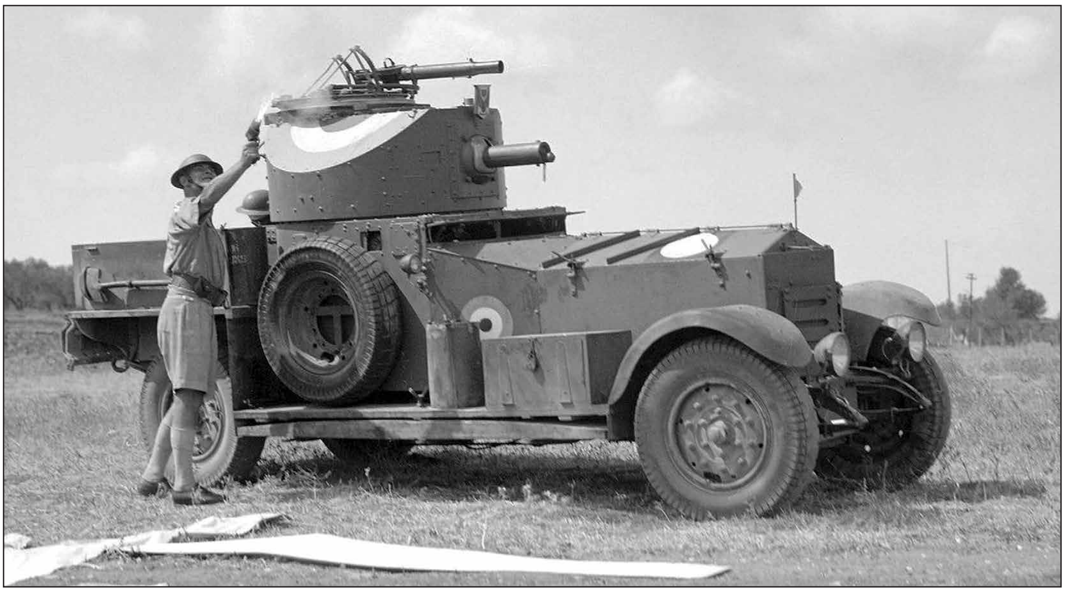
On April 9, the British received yet another report; this time stating that the RIrAF, along with troops from Kirkuk, had been ordered to concentrate at Baghdad. Meanwhile, a new Iraqi Defence Council had been announced which would include Mahmud Salman al-Janabi, the CO of the Iraqi Air Force.

Despite the British demand that Iraqi forces vacate Basra by 2 May, another report on 11 April stated that there was 'No reduction yet made in the number of Iraq Air Force in Basra-Zubeir'. This referred to the Iraqi airfield of Basra-Zubair immediately west of Basra city. Such information was clearly a matter of concern for the RAF as any Iraqi aircraft at Basra-Zubair aerodrome could have threatened British air communications with India.

At this stage, the RIrAF appeared to be a quite significant force with a corps of British trained aircrew and around 116 aeroplanes. However, only around 57 of the latter were believed to be in a serviceable condition. According to a British assessment dated 12th April 1941, they were dispersed as follows:

> Baghdad (total fighting strength 25 aircraft): Breda 65 (8 serviceable, 6 unserviceable), Savoia SM 79B (3 serviceable, 2 unserviceable), Douglas 8A (being fitted with racks to carry 20lb Cooper bombs, nine serviceable, 6 unserviceable, the guns for these aircraft said to be in Basra, plus 4 currently being assembled), Audax (all three serviceable), Vincent (2 serviceable, 1 unserviceable). Also, the following general-purpose aircraft: DH Rapide (2 both serviceable), DH Dragon (1 serviceable), DH Dragonfly (1 serviceable, 1 unserviceable). Also, the following training aircraft: DH Moth (9 serviceable, 18 unserviceable), Magister (1 unserviceable), Nisr [Pegasus powered Audax] (3 serviceable, 3 unserviceable). In the Aircraft Depot for repair: Gladiator (4 unserviceable).
>
> Basra (presumably meaning Basra-Zubair): Vincent (3 serviceable, 1 unserviceable).
>
> Kirkuk: Gladiator (7 serviceable, 1 unserviceable).
>
> Mosul: Nisr [Pegasus powered Audax] (10 serviceable, 1 unserviceable).

Support was widespread for the Iraqi Prime Minister's attempt to expel British forces from his country, but enthusiastic auxiliaries armed with archaic weapons, like these men photographed in 1941, would play no real part in the Anglo-Iraqi war. (Albert Grandolini collection)



At the start of the Anglo-Iraqi War of 1941, British forces inside Iraq were small in number and were often equipped with old-fashioned material. Nevertheless, the Rolls Royce armoured cars of the RAF Regiment, with a distinctive air force roundel on top of their turrets, were amongst the most effective. (Albert Grandolini collection)

Italian sources present a slightly different picture. They noted that Iraq, having very limited anti-aircraft artillery, anti-tank guns or armoured vehicles, had only the RIrAF as an effective means of competing with the British. These sources also maintained that all of the SM 79B bombers were operational and confirmed that none of the Douglas 8A dive-bombers yet had any guns.

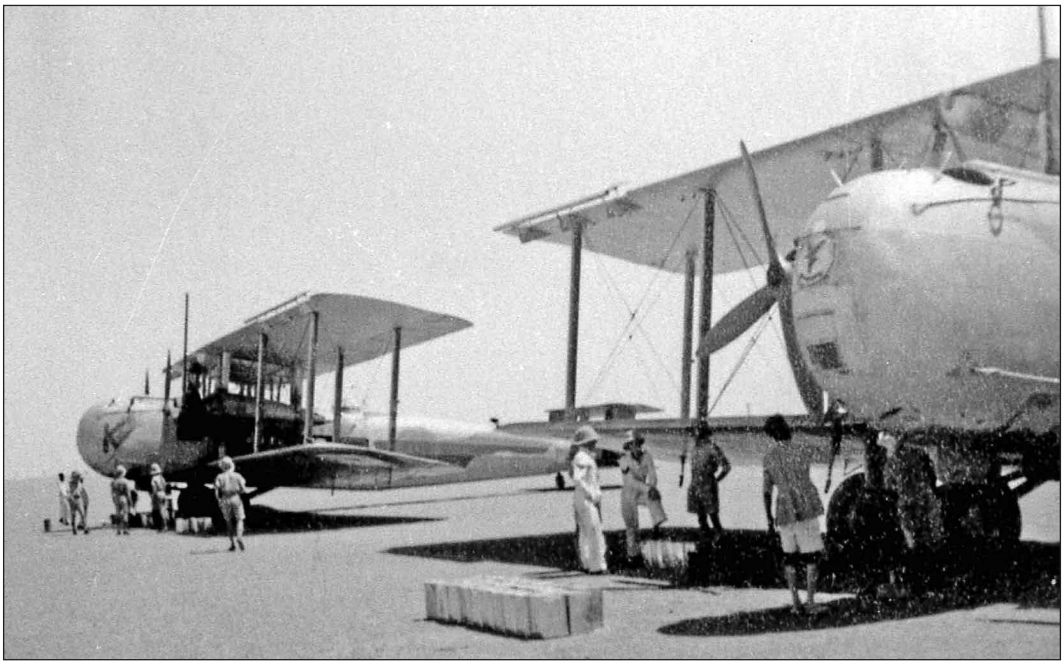
The Iraqi coup and the resulting change of premiership appears to have had relatively few consequences within the command structure of the RIrAF. The only significant exception may have been that Major Hafzi Aziz was replaced as commander of No. 5 Squadron – this Gladiator equipped fighter unit being taken over by Major Isma'il Fattah. Quite what happened to Hafzi Aziz during the subsequent crisis and the brief war with British forces in Iraq, is currently unknown, although he was put back in command later in the year and remained in post until 1944. This might suggest that he had either been removed as 'pro-British', being replaced after the British victor – or perhaps had left the country as a consequence of the coup.

On 15 April, a British document admitted that while exact intelligence was impossible, three RIrAF Vincents were now believed to be in Basra. There was a fear that if Iraqi reinforcements arrived, the Iraqis might attack the British-held port and even the Shaibah air-base. Indeed, this concern was confirmed in almost daily reports and memos on the vulnerability of the British positions in and near Basra. At this stage, the British government tried to give the new Iraqi government the impression that it merely wanted to use Shaibah as a transit point which was allowed under the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty.

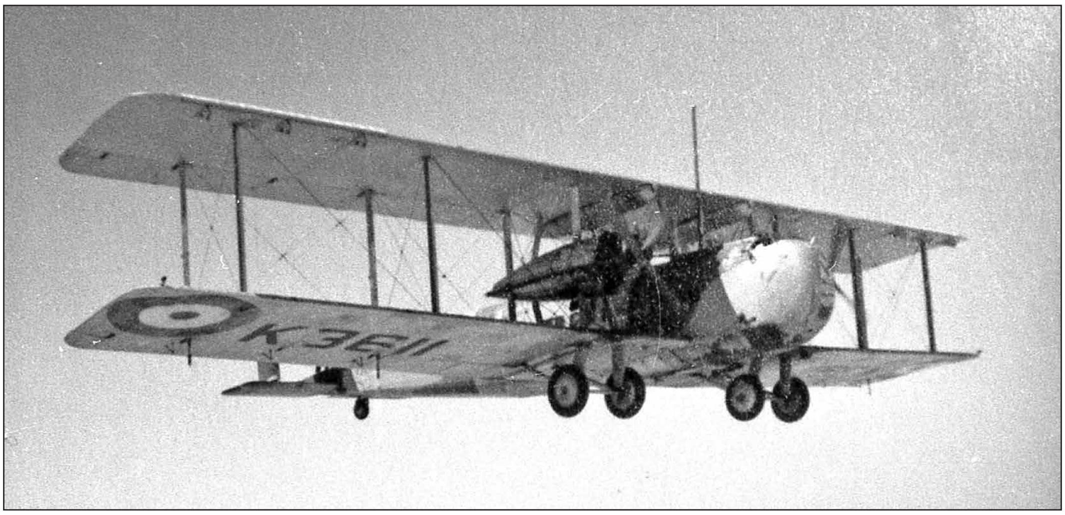
On 16 April, Baghdad was informed – as required under the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty – that troops would be arriving at Shaibah by air from India. The British also maintained that these troops would travel on to Palestine. In reality, this statement was a cover at a time when the British intended to strengthen their position in southern Iraq. Rashid Ali's government was fully aware of that fact and requested that such an airlift be stopped but this request was refused.

Away to the west in Egypt, the British military command already had too much on its plate and did not want to get involved in the Iraq crisis. Therefore, the British reverted to a policy that had been in place since before the First World War, making the government of British India responsible for dealings with Iraq. Army units originally intended for Malaya were sent to southern Iraq instead. Before this could happened, 800 troops from Karachi, in what is now Pakistan, were flown by the RAF's No. 31 (Transport) Squadron to Shaibah on 17 April. Most of the aeroplanes involved were old Vickers Valentia biplanes, DC-2s and other civilian or ex-civilian aircraft.

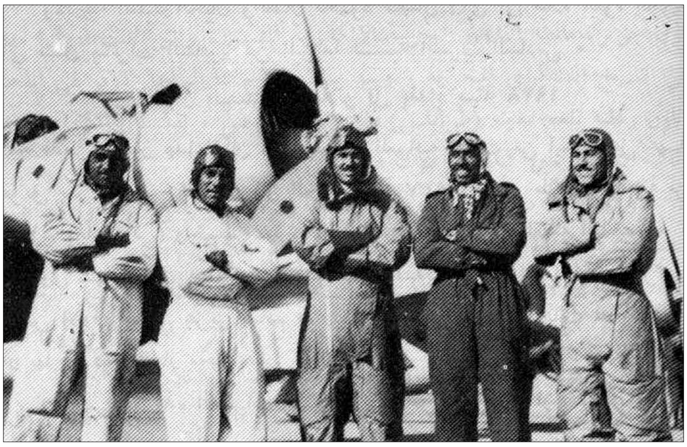
On 18 April, Indian troops landed at Basra and took control of the dock area. However, Iraqi dock workers promptly went on strike, forcing the newly arrived soldiers to unload their own equipment and vehicles. Indian labourers were later brought in but meanwhile, No. 31 Squadron made Shaibah its temporary home. Valentia transports then carried British troops to Habbaniya with the Iraqis making no attempt to stop them. However, when one Valentia had to land at the desert



The initial focus of the Anglo-Iraqi War was the huge RAF base and aerodrome at Habbaniya west of Baghdad, which was home to a major RAF Flying Training School as well as being a major air-transport centre. Here two old-fashioned RAF Vickers 264 Valentias have been given a hurriedly painted camouflage scheme but retain their pre-war individual code letters as well as a squadron badge on the nose; apparently being that of No. 216 Squadron. (John Woodroffe archive)



A Vickers 264 Valentia (K3611) of No. 216 Squadron in flight, showing the camouflage scheme painted on the fuselage and upper wing surfaces, probably photographed during or shortly after Habbaniya campaign. (John Woodroffe archive)



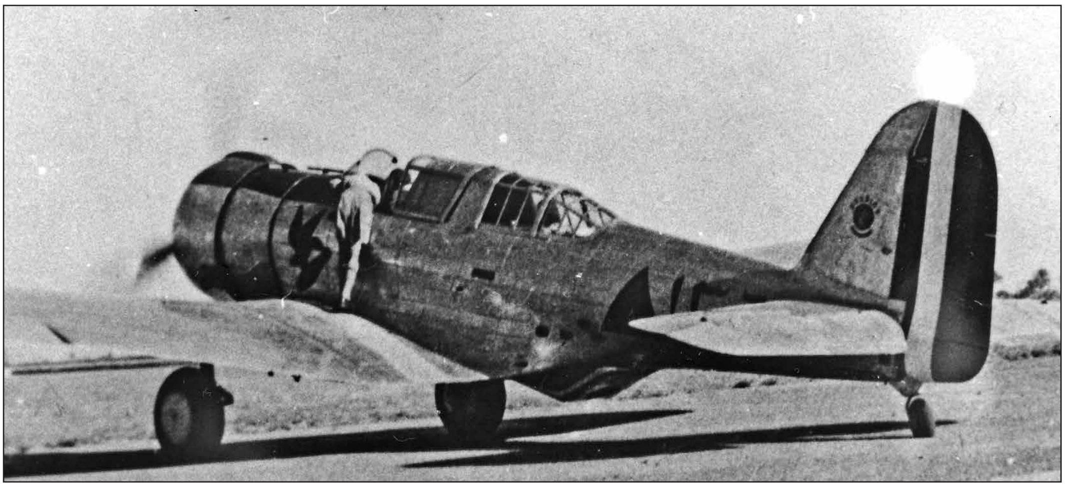
Here some of the aircrews of No. 5 Squadron RIrAF were photographed with one of their Breda Ba 65 ground-attack aircraft (number 108). This was almost certainly before the Anglo-Iraqi War of May 1941. (Iraqi Air Force archive)

airfield of K.4 because of technical trouble, the crew and the 15 soldiers who were their passengers, were taken prisoner while the aeroplane was set on fire. A second Valentia which landed to help, was shot at and promptly took off again, with two men wounded.

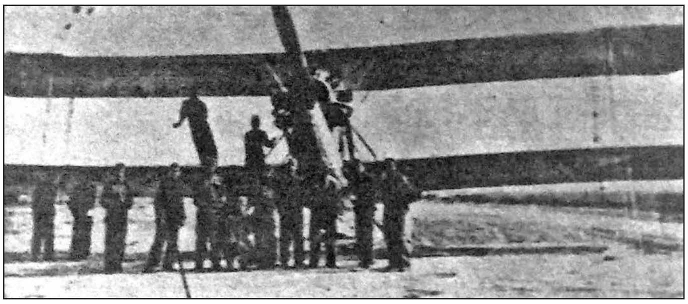
Initially, there had been only three Gladiator fighters at Habbaniya but they would soon be joined by six which arrived from Egypt, plus seven Fairey Gordons from Shaibah. Meanwhile, the resident Airspeed Oxford and Hawker Audax trainers were hurriedly converted into bombers. Most of the Flying School's 36 instructors although highly experienced pilots, lacked recent operational experience. Front-line combat would nevertheless, be their new role as part of what became the RAF's Habbaniya Air Striking Force. Eight Vickers Wellington bombers of No. 70 Squadron were similarly sent from Egypt to Shaibah. Another eight from No. 37 Squadron, went to Aqir in Palestine from where they could support operations inside Iraq, while seven Bristol Blenheim fighter-bombers of No. 203 Squadron were sent to nearby Lydda.

The RAF assembled quite a formidable force in and around Iraq. On 19 April, the commanders of the German troops currently thrusting deeper into Greece, sent an offer of military help to the Iraqi government via the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who was still in exile in Iraq. This was welcome news in Baghdad where Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani)'s government had refrained from ordering a general mobilisation of Iraqi forces. In fact, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) still hoped that the threat of force would oblige the supposedly weakened British, to leave. In the meantime, al-Gaylani (Kaylani) pointed to the terms of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty and requested that the British bring no more troops and aeroplanes into Iraq until those already there had travelled on to Palestine in small units – as the British had promised they would. This request was again refused and instead, London ordered that the whole of the 10th Indian Division be sent to Iraq. More British and Imperial troops landed at Basra on 29 April while four small British warships (already in the area), were joined by the aircraft carrier *HMS Hermes* and two cruisers.

Though the nearby Iraqi forces outside Basra made no hostile moves, the Iraqi government decided to surround the more



A Douglas-Northrop 8A-4 of the RIrAF photographed in Iraq before or during the Anglo-Iraqi War. The serial number on the rear fuselage is probably 136, though the final digit is largely obscured. (Ahmad Sadik collection)



The RIrAF had just one flight of five aged Vickers Vincents, and this appears to be the only known photograph of these machines in Iraqi service. The RIrAF's triangular national marking is just visible beneath the lower left wing. (Iraqi Air Force collection)

vulnerable RAF air-base at Habbaniya. The senior officers of the Golden Square were already in command of significant units in and around Baghdad. Thus, Mahmud Salman al-Janabi was in charge of the RIrAF, while Salah ad-Din al-Sabbagh was at the head of the Iraqi 3 Infantry Division; Kamil Shabib at the head of the 1st Infantry Division and Fahmi Sa'id at the head of the Independent Mechanised Brigade. At the head of the Iraqi government, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) may finally have realised that the British were not going to back down, despite their deteriorating situation on other war fronts. He was also under increasing pressure from several of his military commanders who urged him to increase pressure on the British.

On 28 April, the British Ambassador in Baghdad told the Iraqi government that under the treaty, they had no right to restrict British military movements in Iraq and that the British were within their rights when they established a new military base close to Basra. This was, to say the least, legally debatable. Over the next two days, matters came to a head when Iraqi soldiers not only took control of the Kirkuk oilfields in the north-east of the country but also shut the pipelines from these oilfields, to the port of Haifa in Palestine. To add insult to injury, the previously closed pipeline from Iraq through Syria, now controlled by the Vichy French authorities, was reopened. On 29 April, another convoy of British troop-ships arrived in Basra while elsewhere in Iraq, British civilians were hurriedly evacuated to the sprawling RAF air-base of Habbaniya. About 150 other British subjects found refuge in the American Embassy in Baghdad.

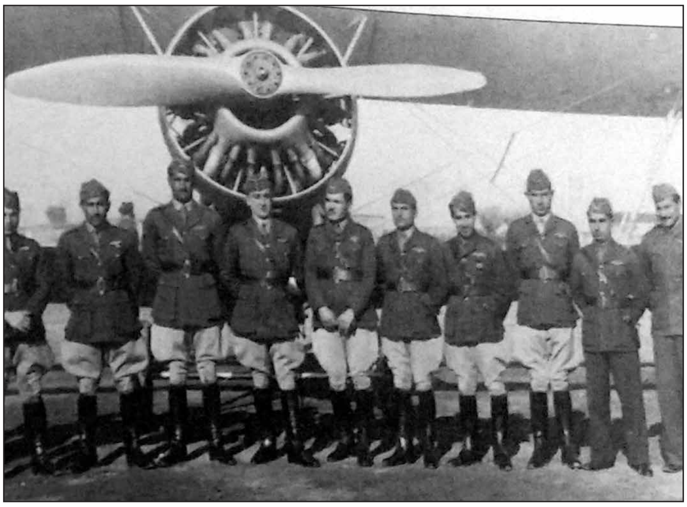
Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) had not intended to take large-scale military action but Salah al-Din Ali al-Sabbagh was not so cautious. He ordered an Iraqi force to move from Baghdad to take up positions on high ground overlooking Habbaniya. Two brigades of the 1st and one of the 3rd Infantry Divisions, reinforced by armoured cars from the Iraqi Army's Mechanised Brigade, set off at three o'clock in the afternoon of 29 April 1941. They were under Colonel Muhammad Fahmi Sa'id, the Commander of the Mechanised Brigade who was a member of the Golden Square.

From their relatively high ground, this Iraqi force attempted to blockade Habbaniya but there were too few to surround the huge RAF base. This was partly because, on the way to Habbaniya, Colonel Sa'id had left one battalion at Fallujah while sending one brigade to Ramadi, 22km west of Habbaniya. This was done without prior agreement with his colleagues in Baghdad. Embankments along a neighbouring stretch of the Euphrates were now cut, allowing the river to flood some low-lying land and cutting access to the Habbaniya air-base from the east. The military significance of this move was, nevertheless, limited because British reinforcement would eventually come from the west.

Thus, the Iraqi force facing RAF Habbaniya now consisted of one infantry brigade, two mechanised battalions, 12 British-made Lanchester armoured cars. The Mechanised Brigade also had Italian-made Fiat Ansaldo CV.33 tankettes, two artillery regiments with twenty-four 3.7in howitzers, twelve 18-pounder field-guns,

Royal Iraqi Air Force squadron personnel lined up next to one of their Breda Ba 65 conversion trainers (number 106) before the outbreak of the Anglo-Iraqi War. (Albert Grandolini collection)

Unlike the perhaps over-enthusiastic tribal volunteers seen earlier, the regular troops of the Iraqi Army troops, like those men photographed here in 1941, were properly trained. Nevertheless, their training and their equipment were both old fashioned, having been designed for operations against dissidents within the country, not against the British Army and its allies. (Albert Grandolini collection)



The officers of No. 1 Squadron, the RIrAF's first squadron of Hawker Nisrs otherwise known as Iraqi Audaxes, formed up in front of one of their machines at Mosul aerodrome. The photograph may have been taken early in 1941, along with similar pictures of other RIrAF units. (Iraqi Air Force archive)

The interior of the cockpit of one of the RIrAF's Savoia Marchetti SM79B in flight. (Iraqi Air Force archive)

fourteen 4.5in howitzers between them, a mechanised machine gun company mounted with Bren Gun Carriers and a mixed battery of anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns. The officers and men of this force, despite having been issued with live ammunition, were reportedly told that they were going to take part in a military exercise. Less than one kilometre away from them lay the perimeter fence of the Habbaniya air-base. It was probably on 30 April that the Gladiators of No. 4 Squadron RIrAF moved from Kirkuk to Hinaidi outside Baghdad.

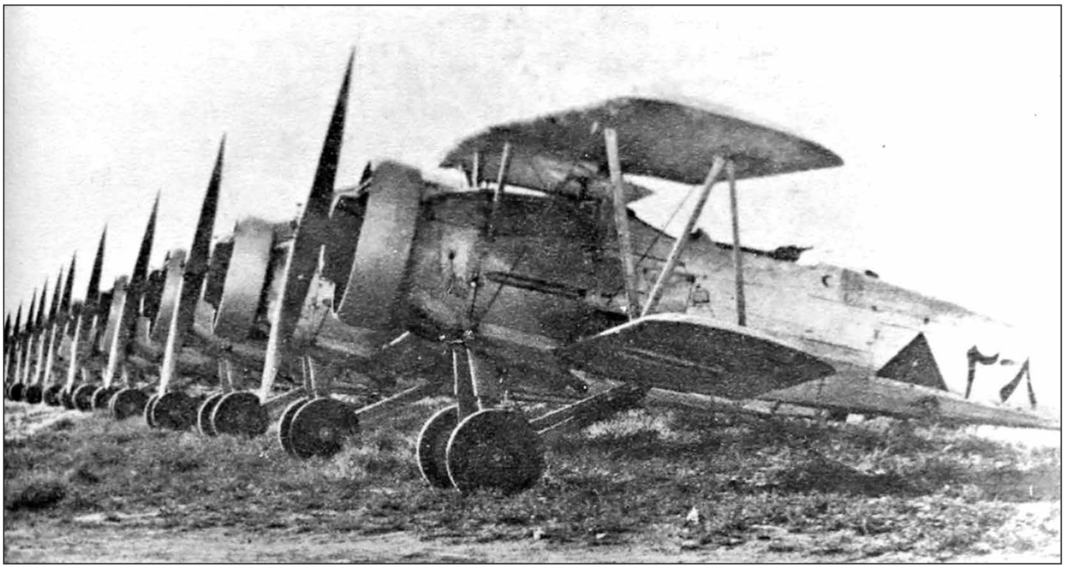
It is now clear that Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) and the Golden Square colonels who had placed him back in power, believed that the British in the sprawling air-base would soon either have to capitulate or would be forced into negotiations, hopefully without a shot being fired. In the event, Air Vice Marshal Harry Smart, the Commanding Officer of the RAF in Iraq (which included Habbaniya), was urged to attack the Iraqis. This was justified, according to the British Ambassador in Baghdad, because the Iraqi military move was an 'act of war'.

At first, not all the RIrAF's squadrons were committed to operations against Habbaniya. Initially, these were carried out by units based near Baghdad, at Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid) and Baghdad civil aerodrome. The units in question were No. 4 Squadron with Gladiators under *R'aid* Abd al-Jalil Husain at Baghdad airport; six aircraft from its reported nominal strength of 15, being partially dispersed (according to a British source dated 1 May 1941). According to a slightly earlier report, seven of this unit's 10 Gladiators had previously been operational while at Kirkuk. The units at Hinaidi were No. 5 Squadron with a nominal 15 Breda Ba 65s (13 machines, all operational according to the earlier report), now commanded by *Rais Awal (Ra'id) Tayar* Isma'il Fattah. No. 6 Squadron was also at Hinaidi with a nominal five Savoia Marchetti SM 79Bs (four machines, all operational according to the earlier report) commanded by *Ra'id* Ibrahim Jawad, along with No. 7 Squadron with a nominal 15 Douglas 8A-4s (or five machines, all operational according to the earlier report) commanded by *Ra'id* Mahmud al-Hindi. Z Flight (separated from No. 1 Squadron) of Hawker Nisrs may still have been at Hinaidi although the rest of No. 1 Squadron was at Mosul (Mu'askar al-Firnas). No. 2 Transport and Communications Squadron was also based at Hinaidi (with seven DH.80A Dragons and five Vincents) under Majd al-Din al-Naqib and while it did not take part in offensive operations, it would suffer significant losses from RAF air-raids.

The only other unit at Hinaidi was the RIrAF's Flying Training School with 22 assorted DH 60s and two Breda Ba 65bis, the operational numbers being unknown. Elsewhere in the country, the larger part of No. 1 Squadron with Hawker Nisrs was still based at Mosul under Abd al-Hamid Ammar; the full strength of No. 1 Squadron reportedly being 25 machines (only nine of which were operational according to the earlier report), including those of Z Flight (currently believed to be at Hinaidi). Also at Mosul, according to the earlier report, were the nine Nisrs of No. 3 Squadron

In the morning of 1 May at 1000 hours, Iraqi aeroplanes were first seen flying over Habbaniya. What they reported back to Baghdad may not have been particularly encouraging, for the RAF presence was approximately as strong as the entire RIrAF and was significantly greater than those units currently at Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid) and Baghdad Airport. Both sides included old and in many cases, clearly outdated machines. In terms of fighters, the RAF had a clear advantage with nine Gladiators. The number of serviceable Iraqi Gladiators almost certainly numbered less than those at Habbaniya.

The British also hoped to make their opponents think that there were more modern Hawker Hurricane fighters at Habbaniya. They did this by removing the upper wings of some non-operational Hawker Audax biplanes. Furthermore, the RAF also had 10 Wellington bombers at Shaibah in the deep south of Iraq, which would be joined by another flight of Wellingtons during the course of the conflict. Shaibah was also home to the old but useful, Vickers

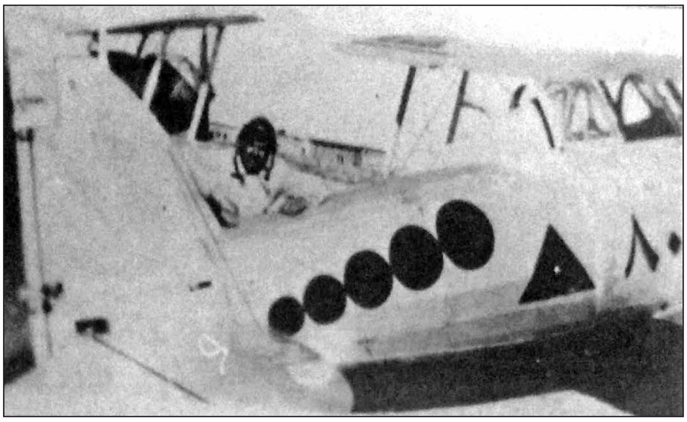


The closest of a line-up of these Hawker Nisrs has a much larger serial number (28) than had been seen before the war. Nevertheless, the fact so many are lined up shows that the photograph was taken before the Anglo-Iraq War. (Ahmad Sadik collection)

Vincents of No. 244 Army Cooperation Squadron, as well as six Fairey Swordfishes from No. 814 Squadron which had come ashore to Shaibah from the Royal Navy aircraft carrier *HMS Hermes*.

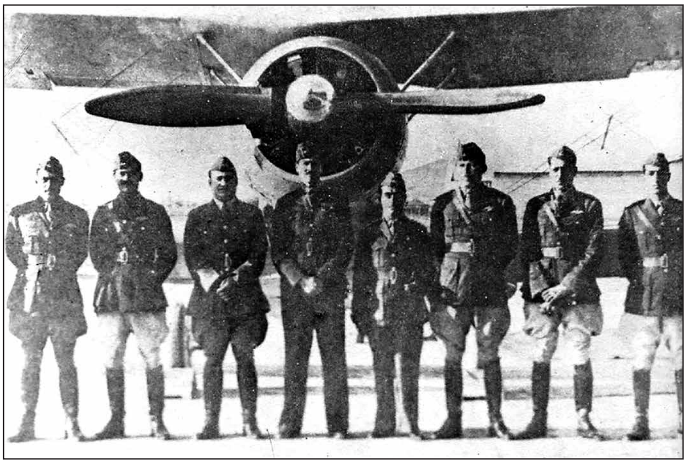
During the night of 1–2 May, more Iraqi troops arrived to strengthen the blockade at Habbaniya, seemingly confident that the British inside the air-base would try to endure the siege rather than to take the offensive. However, Winston Churchill had given orders to the commander of Habbaniya that; 'If you have to strike, strike hard. Use all necessary force'. Therefore, there was surprise and some degree of consternation amongst the Iraqis when, at dawn on 2 May 1941, a reported 30 RAF aircraft flew from Shaibah in the south and from Aqir in Palestine to attack their positions around Habbaniya. One Wellington was hit by ground fire and had to make an emergency landing at Habbaniya aerodrome. This first strike was followed by bombing and strafing attacks by assorted Audaxes, Oxfords and Gordons from Habbaniya itself. One Oxford was shot down, again by ground fire and one Audax failed to return. Others returned more or less damaged and with several aircrew wounded.

For their part, the Iraqis held their positions and fired back vigorously. If the British hoped that such air attacks would cow their enemy, they were wrong and Air Vice Marshal Smart's belief that the Iraqis would simply run away was hugely over-optimistic. The British were also surprised by the speed and strength of the Iraqi response which came in the form of an artillery bombardment of the air-base. Given the Iraqis limited resources, this was quite intensive and destroyed a Gordon on the ground as well as the Wellington which had forced landed after the first British air strike. At 1000 hours, the RIrAF launched its own first attack upon Habbaniya air-base. This was carried out by six Gladiators of No. 4 Squadron operating from Baghdad civilian airport. It was followed by others consisting of bombing and strafing runs by Breda Ba 65s, Savoia Marchettis and Iraqi Gladiators which primarily targeted the RAF Gladiators.



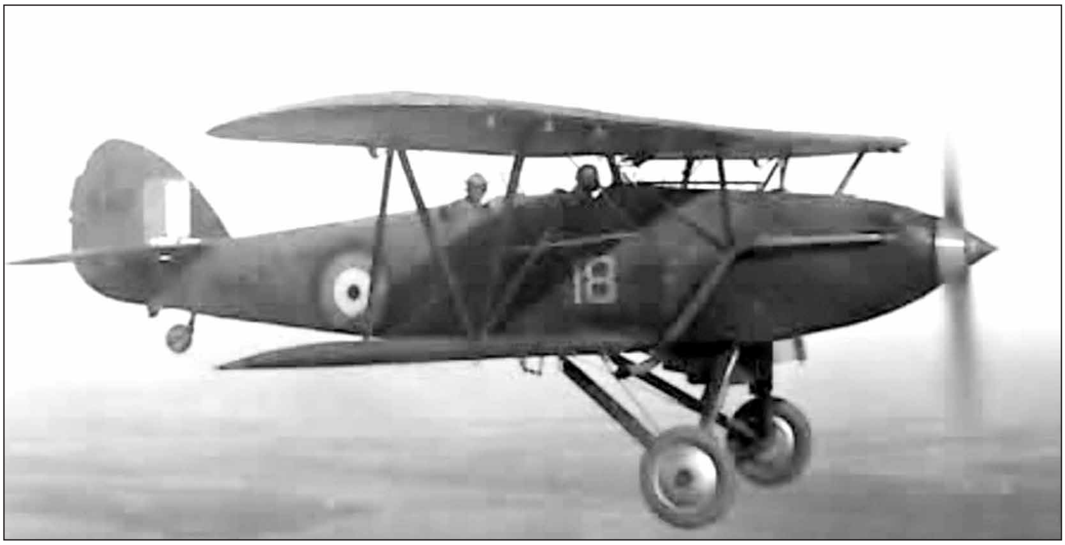
A closer, though still very blurred, photograph of the "five discs" or "five balls" fuselage marking applied to the Gloster Gladiators of No. 4 Squadron RIrAF. This aeroplane also has the serial number 80. At the start of the Anglo-Iraqi War this squadron was stationed at Mu'askar al-Hurriyah outside Kirkuk. (Ahmad Sadik collection)

Three British aircraft were destroyed on the ground, apparently consisting of two Audaxes and an Oxford, while other machines were damaged to a greater or lesser degree – none of the RAF Gladiators were hit. During one raid, an SM 79B was intercepted by an RAF Gladiator but the latter's guns failed and the Iraqi bomber escaped with little or no damage. A Breda Ba 65 also met an RAF Gladiator almost head-on and had to take violent evasive action. According to the British pilot, this Breda suffered damage from his fire.

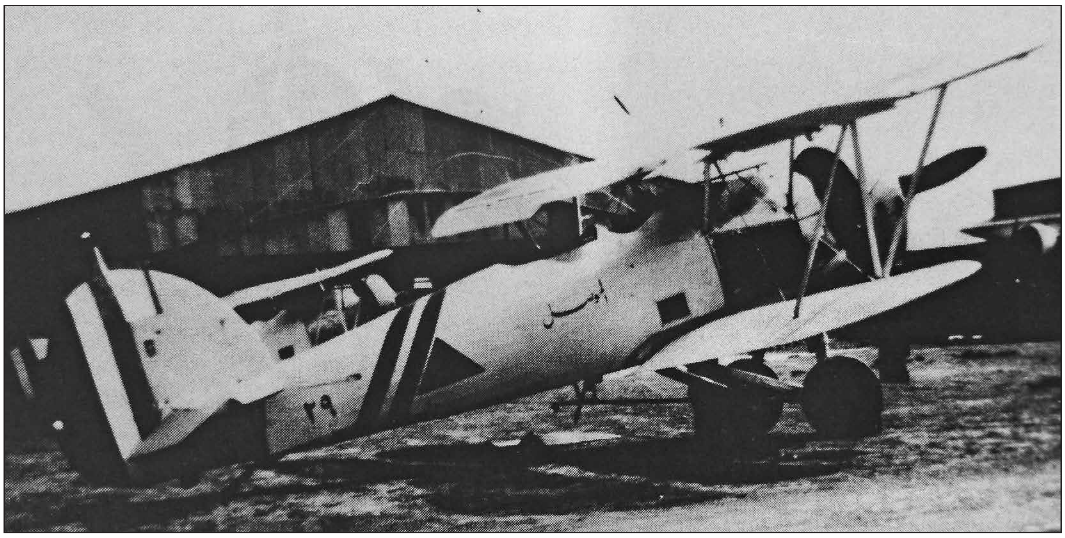


The pilots of No. 4 Squadron, RIrAF in front of one of their Gloster Gladiators early in 1941, probably at Baghdad airport. (Ahmad Sadik collection)

Two officers of the RIrAF with a Douglas 8A-4 dive bomber of the RIrAF photographed in Iraq, probably at Mu'askar al-Rashid. Although these aeroplanes were being fitted with bomb-racks, their guns were held up at the British controlled port of Basra and a long time would pass before any were armed. (Albert Grandolini collection)



A Hawker Audax Mk. I of the RAF in flight over Iraq during 1941. The aeroplane has been hurried painted with a camouflage scheme that apparently obscures its serial number, though the Audax's individual code number 18 has clearly been reapplied. (Albert Grandolini collection)



A Hawker Nisr of No. 1 Squadron RIrAF (serial number 29) which is said to have been photographed at Mosul in May 1941. If this date is correct, it shows that the unit's distinctive diagonal fuselage stripes, first recorded in 1934, were still worn during the Anglo-Iraq war. However, this Nisr also bears the name Al-Musul beneath the observer's cockpit, which may have been a source of confusion. (Squadron Leader S. Sills photograph, via A.S. Thomas)

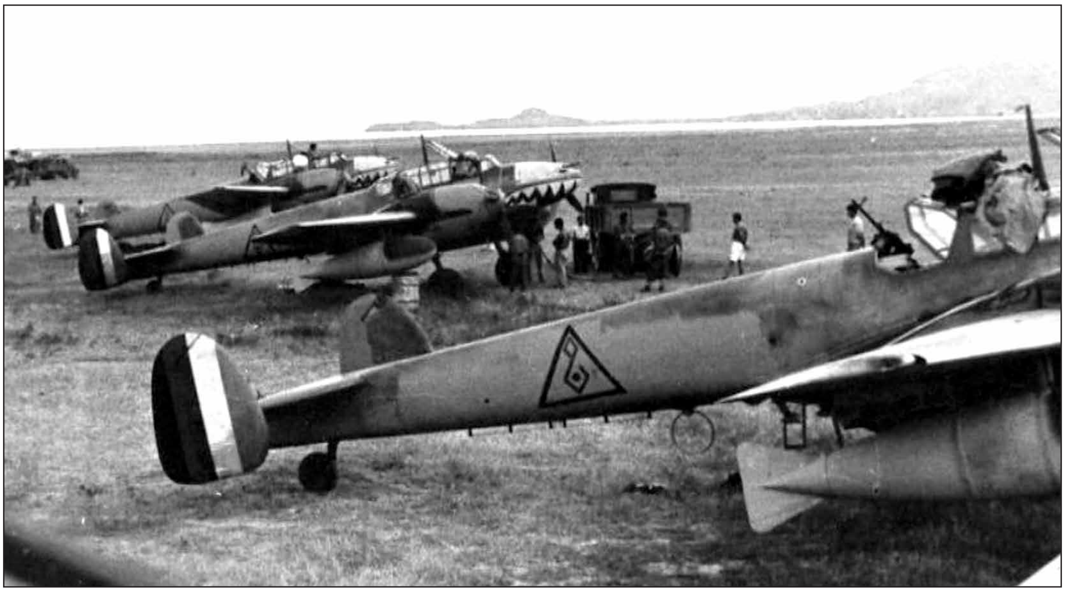
By the end of the day, the RAF at Habbaniya had lost the services of no less than 22 of its 64 aeroplanes, either shot down by Iraqi ground fire, destroyed on the ground or otherwise rendered unserviceable. At around 1800 on this first day of fighting, a formation of 10 Wellington bombers from Shaibah and Aqir were intercepted by two Iraqi Gladiators and reportedly, two Douglas 8A-4s as they approached Habbaniya. The Iraqis harried the Wellingtons for around 20 minutes but were always forced away by defensive fire and supposedly, inflicted no damage. In fact, it is not clear that the Douglases opened fire. They had been without guns until then and may in fact, still have lacked them.

Nevertheless, one of the Wellingtons was badly hit by Iraqi groundfire and had to make an emergency landing at Habbaniya, whereupon it was set on fire by Iraqi artillery. Nine others were so damaged – again, supposedly only by groundfire – that they were declared unserviceable after returning to Shaibah. It has been suggested that two of the other RAF aircraft shot down near Habbaniya on 2 May, may have been downed or damaged by the RIrAF although this remains unclear. Other reports suggest that Iraqi Nisrs from No. 1 Squadron at Mosul also took part in the Iraqi air assault although it seems more likely that they were from the separated Z Flight at Hinaidi. Meanwhile, far to the south, the RAF Vincents and Fleet Air Arm Swordfishes at Shaibah attacked Iraqi forces around Basra city and port, two of the Vincents being downed by ground fire.

Not surprisingly, the Iraqi government now declared martial law and started the process of re-establishing diplomatic relations with Germany. Meanwhile, an Iraqi Air Force officer named Abd al-Jabbar Mahmud (the husband of Princess Rajiha who was one of King Faisal I of Iraq's daughters and therefore the young King Faisal II's aunt), courteously but firmly, removed the British Embassy's radio transmitter in Baghdad.

Well away from any form of publicity, the British intelligence services had been using civilian aeroplanes belonging to the Iraq Petroleum Transport Company Limited. (originally the Anglo-Persian Oil Company Limited.) to drop, collect and maintain contact with secret agents inside Vichy-controlled Syria. These may have included the Company's De Havilland DH 84 Dragons G-ACHV and G-ACKB and De Havilland DH 89 Dragon Rapides G-ACZE and G-ACZF. However, G-ACHV had been commandeered for the RAF on 30 March 1940. It had been given the military serial number X9379 and was struck off charge on 7 August 1940 before the Anglo-Iraq crisis. G-ACKB had similarly been commandeered on 7 July 1940, reportedly being given the military serial number AX863 before being struck off charge on 1 February 1941. G-ACZE was commandeered on 15 July 1940 and given the military serial Z7266. Rather than being struck off charge, this aeroplane was restored to the civil register on 1 February 1942 and was owned by Abadan Airwork Limited but eventually crashed on 27 December 1945. For some reason, G-ACZF was not taken over by the RAF but was similarly transferred to Abadan Airwork Limited.

Such operations were carried out under the cover of a French air transport company called the Société de Transport du Proche Orient based in Paris and Damascus. Its fleet consisted of a Caudron C.448 Goéland (French civil registration F-APKS) and two De Havilland 89 Dragon Rapides with French civil registrations F-AQOH [ex-G-AGDP] and F-AQOI; the latter being destroyed during the Anglo-Iraq War. In fact, the Iraq Petroleum Company created and owned 100 percent of both the Iraq Petroleum Transport Company Limited. and the Société de Transport du Proche Orient.



Three Messerschmidt Bf 110s in Iraqi colours and after their individual codes had been overpainted in light grey. They also carry long-range fuel tanks, as this photograph was reportedly during their transfer to Iraq in 1941. They became part of Sonderkommando Junck, commanded by Oberst Werner Junck in his role as Flieger fuhrer Irak. (Pit Weinert collection, via Tom Cooper)

The Iraqi government now decided that its troops outside Habbaniya should prepare to make a direct assault on the air-base. However, before they could do so, the RAF stepped up its attacks and on 3 May, the second full day of the Anglo-Iraqi War, raided the RIrAF's main aerodrome of Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid). Iraqi Nisrs rose to intercept and reportedly damaged one of three attacking Wellingtons. For its part, the RAF claimed that the air-gunners of a Wellington shot down one Iraqi Nisr and damaged a second.

No. 3 Squadron RIrAF did in fact, lose a Nisr in combat with the RAF over the southern part of Hinaidi aerodrome, its pilot *Mulazim* Abd al-Sallam al-Katib being killed. He was the Royal Iraqi Air Force's first fatality in the Anglo-Iraqi War of May 1941. For its part, the RIrAF again bombed Habbaniya; one SM 79 being attacked and damaged by a British Gladiator while an Iraqi Douglas 8A-4 had to make an emergency landing north-east of Lake Habbaniya. According to some reports, a Savoia and a Nisr also landed there.

As early as the morning of 3 May, Colonel Fahmi Sa'id paused the assault on Habbaniya that had been ordered by Colonel Sabbagh. It was initially postponed until the afternoon but was then again put off. Instead, Sa'id ordered his now battered forces to withdraw towards Fallujah where reinforcements were already gathering. While they were doing so, these Iraqi units were attacked by a ground sortie from the air-base and from the air by RAF Audaxes. Meanwhile, the Iraqi pause followed by a withdrawal, meant that the British could fly reinforcements into Habbaniya while also evacuating civilians and military casualties using six Douglas DC-2s.

The siege of Habbaniya had been lifted largely by the garrison's own efforts. Nevertheless, the British government decided that Rashid Ali's al-Gaylani (Kaylani)'s government must be removed by force, fearing that lengthy negotiations would enable Axis forces to reach Iraq in sufficient numbers to alter the balance of military power. For his part, Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) had similarly assumed that a lengthy siege of Habbaniya would enable help to arrive from Germany and Italy. Not counting on such a vigorous British response, he had insisted that the RIrAF not be fully committed at the outset because he wanted to keep Iraq's small air force intact. Strategically, this was a major error of judgement.

A fourth Wellington attacked Iraqi Army positions close to Habbaniya while the RIrAF kept up its own assault upon the RAF air-base. During the course of these operations, a British Gladiator pilot claimed to have hit one SM 79B which left the area, trailing smoke from its left engine. Another RAF Gladiator pilot attacked one of a flight of Douglases but made no claim to have downed or damaged it. Nevertheless, both a Douglas 8A-4 and a SM 79B were later discovered to have made emergency landings north-east of Habbaniya. Day two also saw the RAF's Habbaniya Strike Force being strengthened with the arrival of four Blenheim IVF fighter-bombers of No. 203 Squadron

On the other side, the Iraqi government sent an urgent official request for assistance to the German and Italian governments and may have asked the Vichy French colonial government in Syria to allow unhindered passage to any Axis aircraft on their way to support Iraq. Also on 3 May, the previous German ambassador to Iraq was told to prepare to return to Baghdad. He was to be accompanied by a small but potent force from the Luftwaffe which now hurriedly started to assemble what came to be known as the *Sonderkommando Junck*. It was named after its leader, Oberst (Colonel) Werner Junck who would be given the title of *Flieger fuhrer Irak*. Sonderkommando Junck would have a strength of 120 personnel, initially with three Heinkel He.111D-2s and three Messerschmitt Bf.110s. Men and machines were currently in short supply because the Luftwaffe was committed to a forthcoming airborne assault on the Greek island of Crete. Junck's men would also be nominally integrated into the Royal Iraqi Air Force at a rank higher than their existing Luftwaffe ranks.

At dawn on 4 May 1941, day three of the Anglo-Iraqi War opened with another Iraqi artillery barrage of Habbaniya, quickly followed by an air-raid by the RIrAF. The RAF was also soon in action, with two Blenheim fighter-bombers taking off from Habbaniya at 0710 to attack both Hinaidi and Baghdad's civil aerodrome. According to the crew of the Blenheim's, an Iraqi Gladiator and three Nisrs were strafed at Baghdad airport while an SM 79B, a Breda or a Douglas and a Nisr, were attacked at Hinaidi. The Nisr was claimed as destroyed and burning. Another RAF Blenheim, conducting reconnaissance over northern Iraq, claimed to have strafed two Nisrs on the ground at Mosul. There would also be an RAF reconnaissance over Kirkuk. In fact, the RIrAF had already started redeploying from Mu'askar al-Rashid to lesser airfields at al-Washash and Baquba; a wise decision that would shortly become clear.

During the morning of 4 May, eight RAF Wellingtons from No. 37 Squadron attacked Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid), claiming to have damaged several buildings and an unidentified biplane on the ground. The Gladiators of No. 4 Squadron RIrAF were still based close to Baghdad, primarily at the civilian airport though one Flight may also have been at Hinaidi. Two Iraqi Gladiators were scrambled and intercepted the Wellington bombers. Iraqi reports stated that one of the Iraqi pilots damaged a Wellington while the second Iraqi

The RIrAF's higher serial numbers seem first to have been applied to its Gloster Gladiators, such as this pair from No. 1 Squadron (numbers 84 and 90) photographed in flight before the outbreak of the Second World War. In fact, the most distant Gladiator (number 90) had been written off by 1940. (Garello collection)

pilot attacked a Wellington that had fallen behind the others after being hit by anti-aircraft fire over Mu'askar al-Rashid.

This Iraqi pilot was Abd al-Salam Yahya al-Katib. He attacked the British aeroplane so vigorously that its pilot was obliged to make an emergency landing outside Baghdad where the crew were immediately taken prisoner. Abd al-Salam Katib thus scored the Iraqi Air Force's first victory in air combat although it seems that his colleague in the second Gladiator was also given some credit for the successful attack.

British accounts merely started that one enemy Gladiator damaged the Wellington flown by Pilot Officer Castello while the second enemy attacked the bomber flown by Flight Officer Rash several times. Another British version maintained that Rash flew low over a 20mm anti-aircraft battery while being attacked from astern by a Gladiator, suggesting that the Iraqi success was shared by the Gladiator pilot and gunners on the ground. A further British account states that the Wellingtons were also attacked by at least two Douglases, one of which came into the range of a Wellington's rear gunner. He claimed that after he opened fire, this Iraqi aeroplane dropped away with smoke coming from the engine. Another Douglas or perhaps a Breda, was similarly claimed to have been damaged, reported spiralling down with smoke coming from its engine.

While returning from a raid, an RAF pilot saw an aeroplane he identified as a RIrAF Nisr, flying south-east of Habbaniya. This machine may have been looking for, or was in some way associated with, a SM 79B and a Douglas, which were spotted on the ground in roughly the same area. These were assumed to be the two aircraft which the RAF claimed to have damaged the previous day and which appeared to have safely force-landed. In fact, Iraqi sources state that the SM 79B, which had landed safely at a place called Khur Akr Kuf, was then set on fire by 'unknown persons'.

A somewhat optimistic RAF statement subsequently claimed that 'at least 22 Iraqi aircraft were put out of action. A number of air combats occurred resulting in several hostile aircraft being disabled'. Meanwhile, a further 13 Iraqi aircraft were claimed as destroyed at Baquba, north of Baghdad. The RAF's claims may have been inflated but the persistent British air attacks on Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid) and Baghdad airport, did convince the RIrAF to move some of its aircraft to what were expected to be, safer locations.

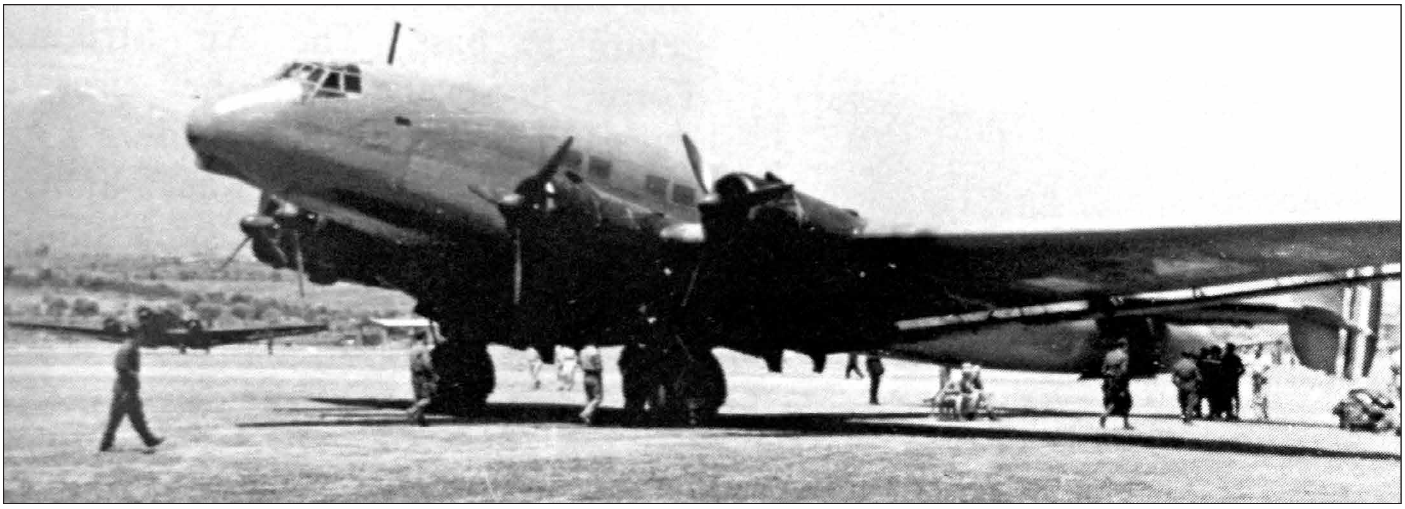
The Gladiators of No. 4 Squadron therefore, left Baghdad's civilian airport for Khan Bani Sa'ad (Baquba) where they would remain until the end of the Anglo-Iraqi War. The Savoia Marchetti SM 79Bs of No. 6 Squadron were similarly transferred from Hinaidi to al-Diwaniya in an operation which ended in disaster. Two had headed south but presumably because of a breakdown in Iraqi communications, the anti-aircraft guns at al-Diwaniyah aerodrome opened fire just as the two machines made their final landing approaches. Both were shot down, resulting in the deaths of *Mulazim* Muhammad Faiz Allah and *Mulazim* Sa'ad Ali of No. 6 Squadron and Major Abd al-Hamid Ammar, the CO of No. 1 Squadron who was probably a passenger in one of these aircraft. The fact that only three men died despite the fact that the machines were at very low altitude, suggests that at least one of them managed to make a reasonably successful crash landing.

As this was happening, the Audaxes, Gordons and Oxfords based at Habbaniya continued to attack Iraqi Army positions around the air-base while in the far south, Fleet Air Arm Swordfishes attacked a railway bridge over the river Euphrates. Two RAF Blenheim IVF fighter-bombers of No. 203 Squadron and four Blenheim IV bombers of No. 84 Squadron also arrived at H.4 airstrip in eastern Transjordan, not far from the Iraqi frontier. Elsewhere in Transjordan, 'Habforce' was being assembled. This was intended to invade Iraq from the west to relieve the siege of Habbaniya and was supposed to be ready for action by 10 May.

Fully aware of the threat, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani)'s government again appealed to Germany and Italy for support. However, the German Army was currently preparing for its airborne invasion of Crete while the Italians were still recovering from their earlier defeats in North Africa and northern Greece. The only positive news for Baghdad was when the Vichy French authorities in Syria, under High Commissioner General Henri Dentz, ignored the supposed neutrality of France and agreed to allow German and – more reluctantly – Italian aircraft to transit, land and refuel if they wished to fly to and from Iraq. The Vichy government was also said to be willing to pass on some military equipment from its own stores, along with military intelligence about the British.

Fighting inside Iraq continued on 5 May, when RIrAF Savoia Marchetti SM 79Bs were fortunate to escape being hit when they were strafed on the ground by an RAF Blenheim which still claimed two SM79Bs and a Gladiator was damaged. RAF attacks on Hinaidi were barely more effective, failing to damage three Bredas and reportedly destroying one small training aeroplane. Again, the RAF's claim that by the end of 5 May, 'the greater part of the Iraqi Air Force has been destroyed by our air action, either while attempting to attack British camps or as a result of attack by our air forces on Iraqi air-bases', was over-optimistic.

Nevertheless, the RIrAF had suffered significant damage and was probably down to less than 25 serviceable combat aircraft. Most of these had also been re-deployed to Baquba which lacked the facilities needed to get damaged machines back into operational condition. Colonel Sabbagh sent another Iraqi Army Brigade from



A Junkers Ju 90 long-range transport aircraft of the German Luftwaffe, wearing Iraqi (RIrAF) national markings. It was photographed at an Italian air bases in the Balkans or Greece on its way to Iraq during the Anglo-Iraqi War of May 1941. (Bundesarchiv photograph)

the capital to support Colonel Sa'id's troops but it was too late and more of the latter started to pull back from their most exposed positions overlooking the Habbaniya air-base.

The RAF appears to have done better on 6 May, claiming a direct hit on an unidentified twin-engine Iraqi machine at Hinaidi. An RAF Gladiator pilot also intercepted a solitary Douglas 8A-4 that was attacking a location identified as the polo-ground at Habbaniyah, claiming to have forced the Iraqi to flee following two bursts of machine gun fire. On the other hand, two British Gladiator pilots were wounded by bombs during this raid, seven other personnel being killed while two RAF Oxfords, an Audax and a Gladiator were destroyed. In fact, there were now only a handful of operational aeroplanes at Habbaniya.

On the other side, Iraqi and Italian records show that by the end of 6 May, all the RIrAF's Breda Ba 65s and four of the five SM 79Bs were unserviceable, some due to enemy action and others because of the Iraqis' chronic lack of spare parts. All that remained operational were some Nisrs, 10 Gladiators and 10 Douglases. Clearly the RIrAF could not continue this struggle for much longer.

Part of the Iraqi plan to protect Baghdad, having pulled back from Habbaniya, was to breach the Euphrates' river flood defences and slow the British advance. It would have limited impact as the river was low at that time of year but as yet, the British made little effort to push towards the Iraqi capital. This was primarily because both sides wanted to control Rutbah and its fort, a vital location close to the frontier on the desert road linking Baghdad and the Transjordanian capital of Amman. It would be through here that Habforce, with its substantial number of armoured cars and tanks, would pass.

Meanwhile, the RIrAF was already drawing up a plan to coordinate with German and Italian air units once these arrived in the north of the country. The first German aircraft of Sonderkommando Junck set off from France on 6 May. Amongst its passengers were German officials and liaison officers. They would fly to Mosul via Italy, Greece and Aleppo in neighbouring Vichy-controlled Syria, with refuelling stops in Beirut and Palmyra.

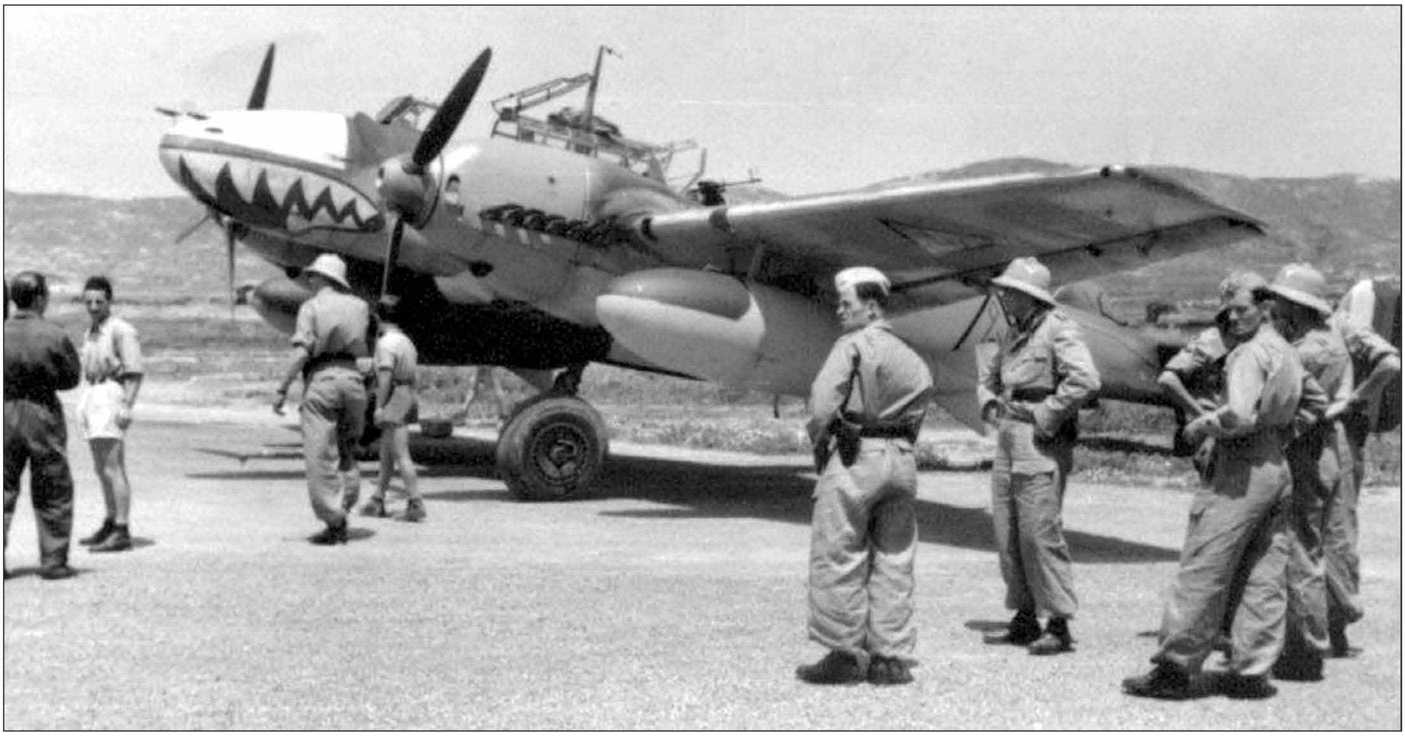
On the Italian side, the Regia Aeronautica sent their 'resident experts' on the Iraqi Air Force, *Teniente* Guza and Bertotto, back to Iraq in a Savoia Marchetti, three engine SM 79 to arrange operational coordination. By the time they arrived in Baghdad, the situation was already critical, with those Iraqi squadrons equipped with Italian machines now desperately short of spare parts. However, Guza and Bertotto also found that the Breda Ba 65s of No. 5 Squadron had carried out several effective missions against Habbaniya with *Mulazim Tayyah* Jawad Husayn (perhaps also known as Jawad Fattuh) having particularly distinguished himself. During their two days in Baghdad, Guza and Bertotto arranged for spares to be sent to the RIrAF, along with a Fiat CR 42 squadron of the Regia Aeronautica. In the event, both arrived too late to alter the course of the battle.

On Wednesday 7 May, Habbaniya was raided by two unsupported Iraqi Nisr which suddenly appeared at 1045 hrs. According to RAF sources, they were pursued at very low level by a NF.Mk IVF night fighter version of the Bristol Blenheim. This was flown by Sergeant Hemstead who claimed to have shot down one Iraqi biplane into the Euphrates. Hemstead was so close to the doomed Nisr that his own aeroplane was splashed with mud from the resulting crash. However, the Iraqi Air Force suffered no fatalities on this day so the mud could have been caused by his own gunfire striking the sodden ground.

Two British Blenheims also attacked Baquba aerodrome at 1440 hours on 7 May with their crews reporting seeing no less than 21 Iraqi Douglas, Breda and Nisr aircraft on the ground. With such a tempting target, the RAF made another attack on the same aerodrome, around two hours later. This time Audaxes and Oxfords of the Habbaniya Strike Force were accompanied by two Blenheim IVFs and claiming six Iraqi machines destroyed with others damaged.

Elsewhere, the Iraqi units from Baghdad which were now advancing from Fallujah to support Iraqi units outside Habbaniya, met the latter as they were pulling back. As a result, both groups stopped in the open, stretched along the single main road in exposed convoys, eight kms east of the Habbaniya air-base. This was promptly spotted by the British who scrambled every available aeroplane to attack such a tempting target. Within two hours, the Iraqi vehicles had supposedly been almost wiped out during 139 sorties by RAF aeroplanes. The Iraqi Air Force naturally did what it could to prevent the disaster, launching three attacks on Habbaniya which killed seven and wounded eight of the enemy while also destroying two Oxfords, a Gladiator and an Audax on the ground. However, the third RIrAF strike was intercepted by RAF Gladiators over Fallujah, the British pilots reporting that they had driven away two Douglases (usually identified as Northrops). Meanwhile, the RAF at Habbaniya received significant reinforcements from Egypt during 7 May.

As yet, still far away from the scene of action, Colonel Werner Junck managed to persuade his superiors that his Sonderkommando



One of the twelve Messerschmidt Bf 110s which formed part of Sonderkommando Junck, the Luftwaffe unit hurriedly assembled and sent to supporting Iraqi forces in May 1941. It has been given RIrAF insignia while retaining its original "shark's mouth" nose decoration. (Albert Grandolini collection)

need to be strengthened if it were to make any real difference in Iraq. In addition to the original three Messerschmitt Bf.110s drawn from the 2nd Squadron of the 2. Staffel/Zerstörergeschwader 26, Junck was therefore allocated nine Bf.110E-1 heavy fighters of the 4/ZG 76, nine He.111P-4 bombers of the Kampfgeschwader 4/K G4 and a battery of 20mm anti-aircraft guns. They were to be transported by 10 Junkers Ju.52/3m aircraft from Kampfgruppe zur besonderen Verwendung 106: K.Gr.z.b.V.106 and three now camouflaged Junkers Ju.90A-0s from the civilian Lufthansa airline.

This formidable force was also expected to quickly return to Greece to support the invasion of Crete. During their transit flight to Vichy-controlled Lebanon and Syria, these machines bore French national markings which were then changed to Iraqi ones after they arrived at Kirkuk in north-eastern Iraq. The only exceptions were the Messerschmitts Bf.110 of 4 /ZG 76 which were given Iraqi insignia before their flight to the Middle East.

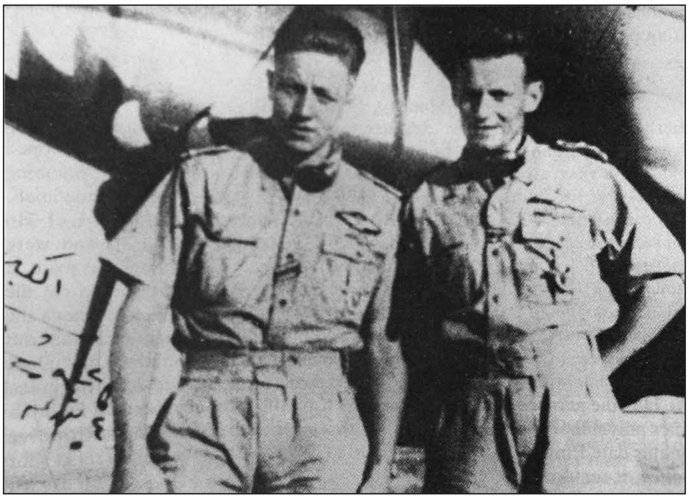
On the following day 8 May, British reconnaissance could not find any significant Iraqi forces near Habbaniya. Much of the RIrAF was however, still concentrated at Baquba. In fact, intelligence reports stated that 21 Iraqi aeroplanes were now there so at 1635 hrs, RAF Audaxes and Oxfords from Habbaniya attacked this airfield, accompanied by Gladiators and two Blenheim NF.Mk IVF fighters. Six Iraqi machines were claimed as being destroyed on the ground while the British Gladiators attacked an Iraqi Gladiator in the air. The RAF pilots claimed that this Iraqi was hit and fell away in a steep dive. Iraqi records admit the loss of Lufti Ahmad al-Jamil although he is stated to have been shot down by Iraqi air defences as he attempted to land at Mu'askar al-Rashid outside Baghdad. Possibly, he escaped the British Gladiators, only to fall victim to Iraqi gunners who believed his Gladiator to have been British.

The RAF's assault on Iraqi air-bases continued on 9 May, during which an unserviceable SM 79B was damaged on the ground at Hinaidi, with three Bredas, a Nisr and Moth also being shot at. Further north, RAF Blenheim fighter-bombers attacked Mosul aerodrome claiming the destruction of a further four Iraqi machines. The RAF was meanwhile strengthened by the arrival at Aqir in Palestine of No. 250 Squadron with its Curtiss P-40 Tomahawks. British forces now took control of the high ground overlooking Habbaniya, where they found one Italian-made light tank, 10 armoured cars, six 3.7in howitzers, one 18-pdr gun, 79 trucks mostly damaged or destroyed, three 20mm anti-aircraft guns and a sizeable collection of firearms. They also took 408 prisoners, many or most of whom were probably wounded or sick.

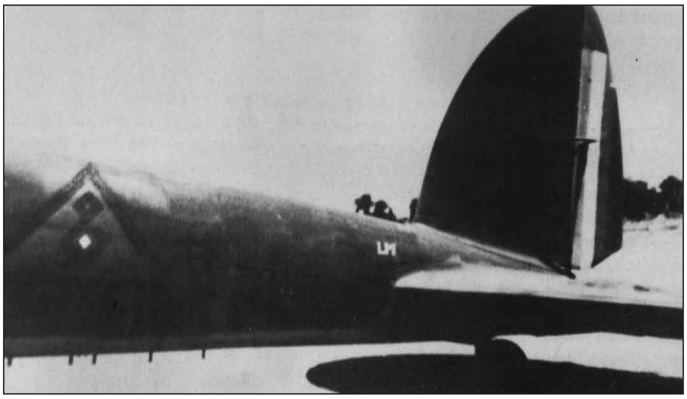
In the air, May 9 was a relatively quiet day although Blenheim night fighters from Habbaniya did attack the aerodrome outside Mosul. Here, their crews claimed to have destroyed three or four Iraqi aircraft while at Mu'askar al-Rashid, the British claimed another SM 79 destroyed on the ground. There were no reports of activity by the RIrAF.

On the 10th, two Luftwaffe Heinkel He.111s arrived in Mosul, shortly followed by another carrying Major Axel von Blomberg who was to be the German liaison officer with Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani)'s government. The third of the He.111 reconnaissance bombers allocated to Sonderkommando Junck flew into a hill while flying from Belgrade to Thessaloniki, killing all nine passengers and crew. However, it would be replaced by two Ju.52/3m transports, one of these would bring long distance radio sets to enable Junck to communicate with German headquarters in the Balkans. It also carried equipment to test the aviation fuel available in Iraq which the Germans feared might not be suitable or indeed reliable enough, for their aircraft.

Germany would eventually send 30 aeroplanes with aircrew, technicians and advisors to Mosul via Syria, along with aviation fuel, weapons and ammunition which went by railway through Turkey. This Luftwaffe expeditionary unit, under Oberst Werner Junck, would largely be drawn from the Fliegerkorps VIII based in Athens. It eventually had 12 Bf.110C twin-engine fighters from 4/ZG 76. Apart from its commander, the other pilots were Oberleutnant Herget, Lieutenant Drewes, Lieutenant Eisenach, Lieutenant Froehling, Oberfeldwebel Brandsetter, Unteroffizier Neureiter, Oberfeldwebel Piwarz, Unteroffizier Hennies, Unteroffizier Wenke, Unteroffizier Ziegler and Obergefreiter Bob. There was also a *Kette*



Martin Drewes (left) with his radio operator (right) in Iraq with their shark-mouthed Bf 110C. Drewes claimed his first victory on 20th March 1941 over Iraq and later became a night-fighter ace in defence of the German heartland. The partially obscured Arabic writing on the left includes the work Akbar or "greatest". (K. Ries collection)



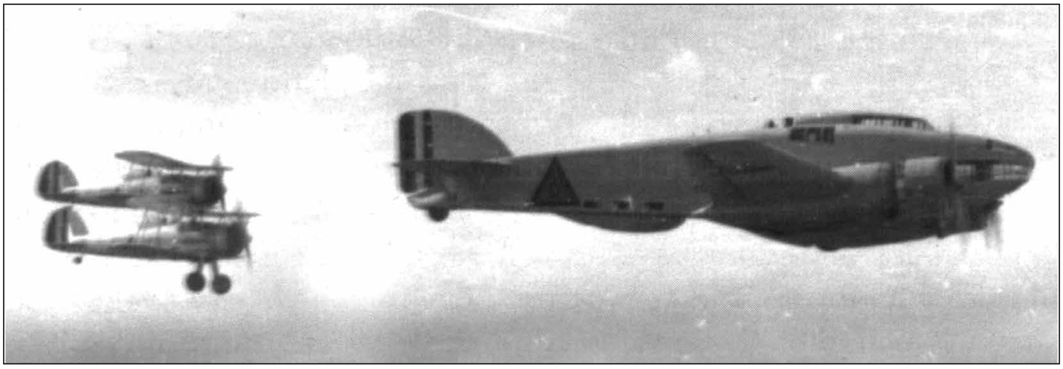
A partial photograph of one of the Heinkel He 111H-6 bombers sent to support the Iraqis in May 1941. Its original identification code of 5J+LM was overpainted when its Luftwaffe markings were replaced by those of the RIrAF. The letters LM were nevertheless repainted on the rear left side of the fuselage. (via W. Bock)

or Flight from I/ZG 26 led by Lieutenant Woerner with two Bf.110Cs and seven He.111 H-6 bombers from 4/KG 4 led by Hauptmann Schwanhauser who was given the acting rank of a Major in the Royal Iraqi Air Force. Next, came a transport contingent of 20 Ju 52/3m under Hauptmann Harry Rother and the four-engine Ju.90 transports.

All these machines would have their Luftwaffe national markings overpainted – sometimes not very effectively – with Iraqi ones. There was also a much-needed 20mm Flak 38 anti-aircraft battery. The flights from Greece to Iraq did not always go smoothly and on 11 May three Messerschmitt Bf.110Cs of the 4/ZG 76 were intercepted by French Morane Saulnier 406 fighters of Groupe de Chasse 1/7 and were obliged to land. The Germans also complained that the aerodromes of Mu'askar al-Rashid (Hinaidi) and Mosul lacked camouflage or dispersal facilities for their aircraft, as well as having inadequate anti-aircraft defences.

On 12 May, five more He.111s set off from Italy, arriving in Syria the same day. These are known to have carried the Luftwaffe identifications 5J+AM, 5J+AC, 5J+LM, 5J+BC and 5J-GM. Those of the crew whose names are known included Oberleutnant Schmidt, Oberleutnant Graubner, Lieutenant Lothar Wolf, Oberfeldwebel Thomas, Fahnenjunker Prinz, Unteroffizier Guretzki, Unteroffizier Weber and Obergefreiter Oertel. They were accompanied by a small number of technical support personnel.

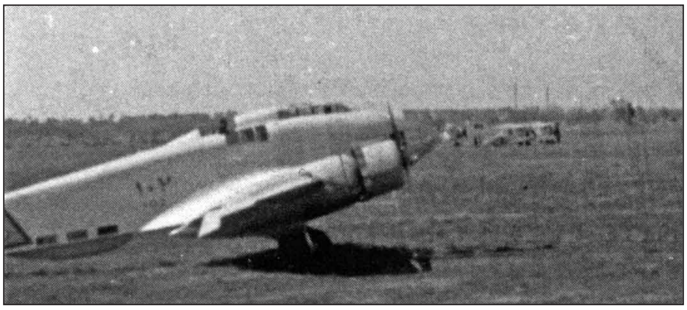
Meanwhile, on 10 May, RAF machines again attacked Iraqi airfields in the centre of the country, repeating such raids on 11 and 12 May. Even more significantly, on 11 May the roughly 6,000 British, Commonwealth and Imperial troops of Habforce set off under the command of Major-General John Clark from Haifa in Palestine, to relieve the RAF air-base at Habbaniya. The main force was preceded by a flying column known as Kincol, under Brigadier J.J. Kingstone. Away to the east, the small and isolated Iraqi frontier garrison at Rutbah oasis managed to shoot down an RAF Blenheim on 11 May but, after being bombed and shelled for three days, withdrew thus leaving the road open for Habforce. On 13 May, Kincol – the advance unit of Habforce – crossed the Iraqi frontier and took control of Rutbah fort.



A Savoia Marchetti SM.79B of No. 6 Squadron RIrAF escorted by two Gloster Gladiators of No. 4 Squadron photographed at the end of the bomber's delivery flight from Italy before the outbreak of the Second World War. The Gladiators do not yet appear to have No. 4 Squadron's distinctive "five discs" insignia applied. (Garello collection)

The British were soon aware of the presence of the Luftwaffe contingent in Iraq. They were also aware of the assistance being offered by the Vichy authorities in Syria. Meanwhile, the Italians were preparing their contribution to the Iraqi campaign in an operation to be known as Mission Aid for Iraq. It was drawn from 8 Gruppo CT, part of Stormo 6 which had included Squadriglia 153, 154 and 155. Equipped with old fashioned Fiat CR 32s at the start of the Second World War, 8 Gruppo had been involved in the brief frontier conflict with France in June 1940 when it operated from Sardinia. The CR 32s were replaced by slightly more modern CR 42s during the early months of 1941 though these were supposed to be soon replaced by Fiat G 50bis monoplane fighters. In the meantime, the Gruppo escorted bombers that attacked a British Mediterranean convoy on 7 May. Then, came new orders which would send one of the Gruppo's squadrons to northern Iraq.

On 12 May, the Regia Aeronautica's 155 Squadriglia, 3 Gruppo, 2 Stormo CT set off from Alghero in Sardinia. Also known as the 'Special Squadron Iraq', it included 12 pilots: *Capitano* Francesco Sforza who was in command, *Teniente* Adrian Porcù, *Teniente* Emilio Valentini, *Teniente* Arnaldo De Merich, *Teniente* Bruno Contaldi, *Sergente M*. Giuseppe Ravasio, *Sergente M*. Cormons Tieghi, *Sergente M*. Luigi Dondi, *Sergente M*. Riccardo Sala, *Sergente M*. Giuseppe Pacini, *Sergeant* Angelo Squarzoni and *Sergeant* Virginio Stella, plus 30 technical ground crew. At Ciampino South aerodrome they were reviewed by General C.S.M. Pricolo, before setting off for northern Iraq.



Savoia Marchetti SM.79B number 102 of No. 6 Squadron, with several Iraqi Gloster Gladiators in the background. They were probably photographed at Mu'askar al-Rashid. (Garello collection)

One of the three Heinkel He 111 of Kampfgeschwader 4./K.G.4 assigned to Sonderkommando Junck. The machine is being bombed up by Luftwaffe personnel in Iraqi uniforms at Mosul's Mu'askar al-Firnas aerodrome during the Anglo-Iraqi war. (Bundesarchiv collection)

On 13 May, a RAF Blenheim on reconnaissance over the Mosul area, was intercepted by a Bf.110 in Iraqi markings. The Messerschmitt made four attacks but inflicted no damage. On the same day but somewhat later, another RAF aircraft spotted a Bf.110 flying near Mosul. On 14 May, two large Italian Savoia Marchetti SM 82 transports took off from Lecce, carrying 20 boxes of machine guns for the Iraqis. This was followed by other shipments of military equipment on 15 and 22 May, mostly carrying ammunition and light weapons. The Italian plan was to send most of the military aid by rail to Thessaloniki in northern Greece, then by ship to Rhodes and only using air transport for the final stage from Rhodes to Iraq. However, this proved much more difficult to organise than had been anticipated.

Meanwhile, Sonderkommando Junck continued to transfer its assets from Germany to Iraq during May 13 to 15. Despite official agreements between the German government and the Vichy French authorities, the men of the Sonderkommando found that they were by no means welcomed by their French counterparts in Syria. For their part, the British were only aware that the Vichy authorities agreed to help the Germans as they transited through their territory. Thus, the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, told Parliament:

> The French authorities in Syria are allowing German aircraft to use Syrian aerodromes as staging posts for flights to Iraq. His Majesty's Government have in consequence given full authority for action to be taken against these German aircraft on Syrian aerodromes. The French government cannot escape responsibility for this situation.

In fact, the RAF was sent to attack the aerodrome outside Palmyra in central Syria on 14 May which was being used as a transit point by the Luftwaffe. As a result, two He.111s were destroyed on the ground by British Blenheims and Tomahawks operating either from Aqir in Palestine or H.4 in Transjordan. At the time however, those RAF crews who took part in this raid returned with very conflicting information, some claiming to have attacked Ju 80s, a Fiat CR 42s and two (presumably) French civilian biplanes, while others stated that they had seen four He.111s and a Ju 52/3m.

<cap>051 – This Luftwaffe Heinkel He 111H-6 of 4-KG4 which had been assigned to Sonderkommando Junck was reportedly abandoned, damaged beyond repair, at Aleppo aerodrome in northern Syria. Its German markings had been quite crudely overpainted and replaced by those of the RIrAF, though its individual Luftwaffe identification code of 5J+GM was apparently still visible. (Garello collection)

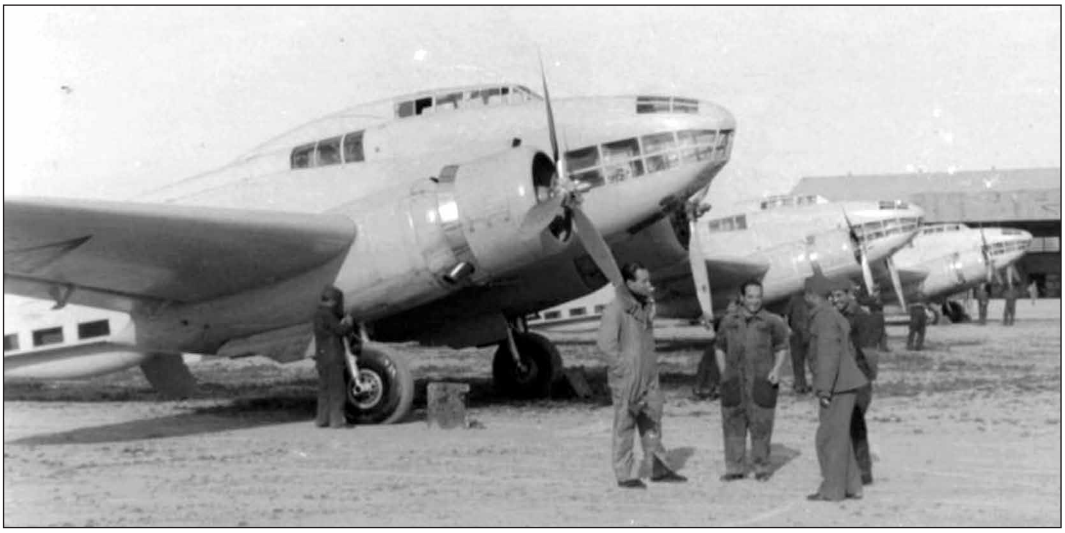
<cap>052 – Iraqi Army artillery photographed either during the May 1941 Anglo-Iraqi War, or during earlier manoeuvres. (Albert Grandolini collection)

German accounts stated that the British aircraft appeared just after three He.111s had taken off for Mosul, leaving two Heinkels on the ground which were then destroyed – supposedly by just one of the attacking British fighters. Far to the east, the airfield outside Irbil in north-eastern Iraq was also attacked by the RAF which claimed to have strafed six monoplanes which had been ineffectively camouflaged by Bedouin tents. These machines were almost certainly Iraqi and were probably the Douglas 8A-4 fighter-bombers which had been dispersed here and elsewhere.

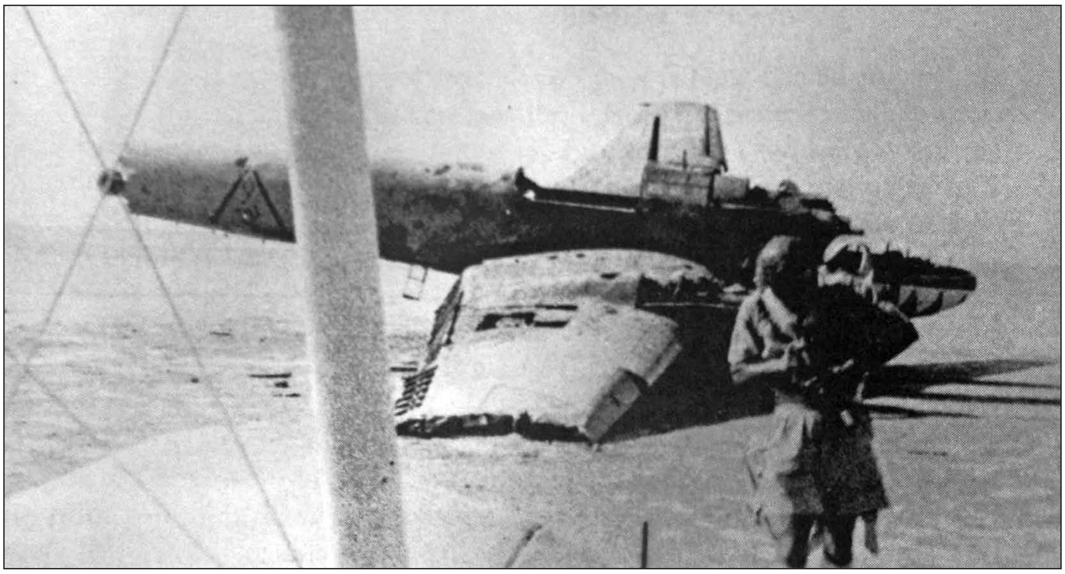
The following day 15 May 1941, RAF reconnaissance confirmed that German aircraft were still at Palmyra. Further attacks claimed to have damaged three Ju 52/3m transports there. A final raid by RAF Tomahawks and Blenheims at 1530, identified one He.111 – possibly the machine previously destroyed – plus two Ju 52/3ms and two Ju.90s but were unable to attack because of heavy ground mist. By now however, the Luftwaffe contingent in northern Iraq was ready to enter the fray. Consequently, the British Habforce column driving across western Iraq towards Habbaniya was, much to its surprise, strafed by a Bf.110 which inflicted a number of casualties. This followed, what was described as a first-alert crash, when one of Sonderkommando Junck's Bf.110s was destroyed. In the event, several twin-engine Messerschmitts were sent on reconnaissance along the border between Iraq and Syria.

The fact the Habforce was surprised by this air attack, suggests a lack of communication on the British side, as the RAF clearly knew that there were German warplanes in northern Iraq. Elsewhere Kincol, the lead element of Habforce, was reportedly bombed and strafed by a solitary Iraqi SM 79 as it advanced eastwards from Rutbah on 15 May although no casualties were suffered. This may also have come as a surprise, as the British already claimed to have destroyed or damaged more Savoia Marchettis than the RIrAF actually had. Nevertheless, the Iraqi Army's inability to hold Rutbah shook the Iraqi people's confidence in their new government.

It was also on 15 May that Major Axel von Blomberg flew to Baghdad in one of the He.111s. According to one source, the Heinkel was fired on by local tribesmen as it came in to land, flying low and slow. Another account claimed it was fired at by Iraqi troops while yet another version maintained that the German aeroplane arrived in the middle of a dogfight between British and Iraqi aeroplanes – though there is no record of such a combat in British sources. Whatever the cause, when the Heinkel landed at Mu'askar al-Rashid, Blomberg was found to be dead with a bullet through his head. On



RIrAF personnel and a line-up of Savoia-Marchetti SM.79B bombers photographed in Iraq. At the start of the Anglo-Iraqi War, No. 6 Squadron had just four of these aircraft, all reportedly operational. (Albert Grandolini collection)



The Messerschmidt Bf 110C of II-ZG 76 in RIrAF markings. It had made a hard emergency landing at or near Mu'askar al-Rashid aerodrome after being claimed as shot down in flames by Sgt. W.H. Dunwoodie and Sgt. E.L. Smith of No. 94 Sq RAF on 17th May 1941 (via A.S. Thomas)

hearing of this disaster, Oberst Junck flew to Baghdad the following day. There, he discussed the situation with Prime Minister al-Gaylani (Kaylani), Major-General Amin Zaki, Colonel Nur al-Din Mahmud and Dr. Grobba, the German Ambassador. Eventually, it was decided that the Iraqi Army should defend Fallujah before again attempting to seize the sprawling RAF aerodrome at Habbaniya. This time however, they would be supported by German aircraft.

The fact that German and Italian support was slow to arrive and to take effective action certainly contributed to a decline in Iraqi morale. Of the transports which had been allocated to Junck's force, only three ex-civilian Ju.90s had reached Iraq, two carrying anti-tank weapons for the Iraqi Army and the third bringing 72 SC.50 bombs for the German Heinkels and Messerschmitts.

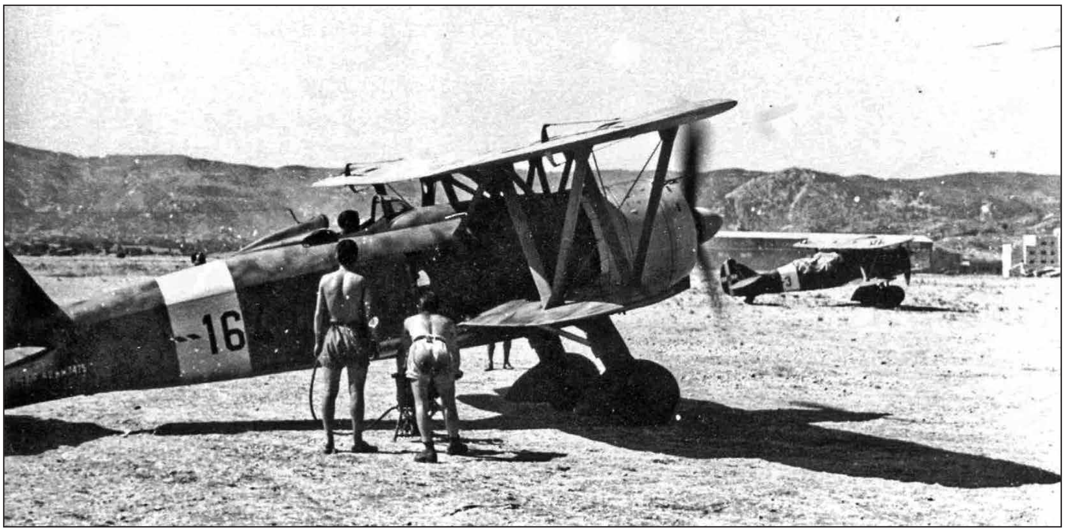
Having taken over command of the Luftwaffe force in Iraq following Von Blomberg's death, *Flieger fuhrer Irak* Werner Junck had 108 men under his command, five He.111s (although only four were operational) and 12 Bf.110s, of which seven were currently operational. Contrary to British reconnaissance reports, there were no single-engine Bf.109 fighters in this array. Nevertheless, conditions were far from ideal and frequent British air-raids significantly slowed down German preparations outside Mosul.

On the morning of 16 May, the Luftwaffe force launched a significant raid upon Habbaniya when six Bf.110s strafed the air-base and shot down an RAF Audax in full view of those on the ground. Whether these were the same three German aeroplanes which also attacked a British advanced column after it bypassed Ramadi, damaging several vehicles, is unclear. Next came the three He.111 bombers which made two bombing runs despite being attacked by a RAF Gladiator of No. 94 Squadron This Gladiator damaged one of the bombers which subsequently had to make an emergency landing between Habbaniya and Mosul but in the process, was itself shot down by the bombers' air-gunners, the pilot being killed.

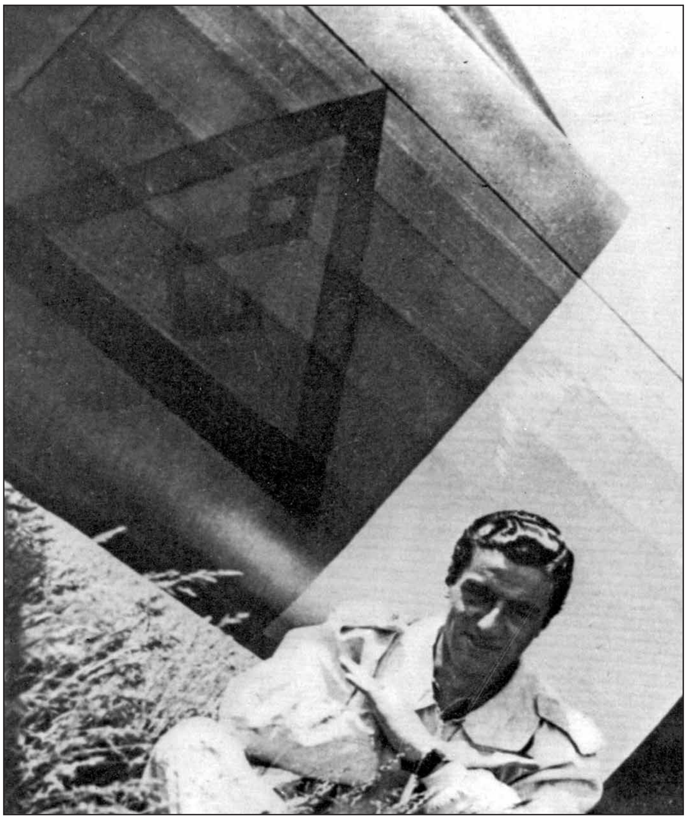
These three Heinkels were led by Hauptmann Schwanhauser and after an hour and a half flight from Mosul, they approached Habbaniya at 0935 hrs. Schwanhauser and one of the other Heinkels attacked immediately but Oberleutnant Graubner flew off to attack other British aeroplanes on the ground. Graubner was in the process of releasing his bombs when he saw a streak of dust on the airfield. It marked the process of a RAF Gladiator taking off to intercept the He.111s. The German aeroplanes then prepared their second attack run but as the British fighter was now high enough to threaten them, they turned homewards. The Gladiator was still climbing when it came into range and according to Oberleutnant Graubner, the RAF pilot selected his aeroplane as its target.

Then came the sound of machine gun fire although the German pilot could not tell whether it was the enemy's bullets hitting his He.111 or his own gunners returning fire. As Graubner recalled, he and Fahnenjunker Prinz, the other man in the Heinkel's cockpit, saw the wing of their machine being hit, accompanied by a roaring noise. A shout came from a member of his crew; 'Shot down!' His flight engineer reported: 'Now it is breaking up. Now it has crashed'. Between them, Ofw. Thomas and the radio operator Unteroffizier Guretzki had shot down the RAF Gladiator although viewers on the ground believed that it had been caught in crossfire from all three German aeroplanes.

Nevertheless, Graubner's He.111 had also been hit and its starboard engine was vibrating badly, losing oil and getting increasingly hot. While the two other members of the flight continued with their reconnaissance, Graubner headed for Mosul. After 10 minutes flying, the damaged engine stopped, the He.111



A pair of Italian Fiat CR 42 biplane fighters at Rhodes-Maritza aerodrome on the Italian-ruled Greek island of Rhodes immediately after their return from Iraq. The closest machine still bears its original Regia Aeronautica number MM 7475. However, the No. 164 Squadriglia identification code 164-5 had been added after its return to Rhodes. (Garello collection)



Another Regia Aeronautica Fiat CR 42 in incomplete Iraqi markings with an unnamed pilot of No. 155 Squadron in what Westerns of the time thought of an "oriental pose". (Author's collection)

could not maintain altitude and everything non-essential was jettisoned, except for the guns. Graubner headed east in the hope of reaching a more inhabited zone along the river Tigris but was unable to do so. They were still over desert when, at some 10 metres above the ground, Graubner told his crew to strap themselves in, ready for a crash landing. They came down in a cloud of dust but survived. The Heinkel He.111s of KG 4 did not attack Habbaniya again although two British aircraft had been destroyed on the ground during this raid on 16 May. Instead, Mosul aerodrome continued to be a target for the RAF.

The following day, 17 May, Mu'askar al-Rashid was targeted by RAF Gladiators which caught two Bf.110s of I/ZG26 as they were taking off. Both were shot down, one crashing in flames with the deaths of both crew members, believed to be Lieutenant Woperner, the CO of ZG 26 and his gunner Unteroffizier Fischer, while the other made a forced landing. This was probably the Bf.110 later photographed on the ground by the British.

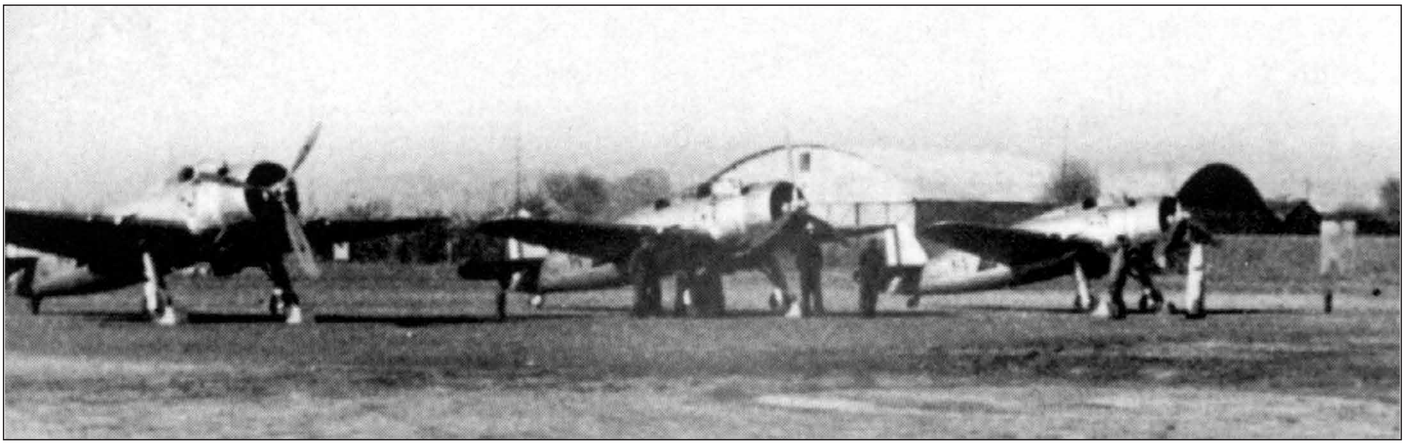
There was another attack in Hinaidi later in the day, while elsewhere the RAF assault continued on aerodromes in Vichy-governed Syria. Two German transport aircraft were claimed as damaged at Palmyra and a Ju 52/3m destroyed at al-Mizzah outside Damascus. Reconnaissance was also flown over Palmyra, Aleppo and Damascus as well as Rayaq in Lebanon. Nevertheless, the German Sonderkommando had now been reduced to four He.111 bombers (not all operational) and eight Bf.110 fighters so Junck decided to concentrate his remaining aircraft at Mu'askar al-Firnas outside Mosul.

The willingness of the Vichy authorities to allow Syria to be used by the Axis air forces caused tension in the French forces stationed there and several men defected to join the Free French units now in Palestine. General Valin, head of the Free French air wing which was still part of the British RAF, not yet being an air force in its own right, had already broadcast a radio appeal for French airmen in Syria and Iraq, saying:

> You in Aleppo and Damascus … who rage in your hearts to see German planes landing on your aerodromes on their way to Iraq, know full well that by receiving and refuelling the planes full of troops you are committing a hostile act against Free Frenchmen … In all conscience you must not do it; you will not do it. You cannot go down to history under the weight of such an infamy.

The tide had clearly turned in favour of the British in Iraq – both on the ground and in the air. Four Hurricane fighters arrived at Habbaniya on 17 May and over the next two days the RAF's offensive against the Luftwaffe contingent in northern Iraq is said to have destroyed or damaged about a third of the German aeroplanes. Nevertheless, a section of two or three Bf.110s strafed the Habforce column which was now approaching Habbaniya. Over the past few days, little had been seen on the RIrAF. In fact, it was attempting to reorganise itself, having largely been dispersed away from the Baghdad area. During this process No. 4 Squadron also suffered another loss on 18 May when *Mulazim Tayyar* Naji al-Zanburi's Gladiator crashed at Khan Bani Sa'ad, killing the pilot. No. 4 Squadron had been moved from Baghdad civil aerodrome to Khan Bani Sa'ad near Baquba as part of the dispersal programme.

Having relieved RAF Habbaniya on 18 May, Habforce sent some 2,000 troops and 500 vehicles to attack the Iraqi forces defending Fallujah. On their way and largely confined to the single proper road, this British force was attacked by four Messerschmitts. Nevertheless, three of the latter were so severely damaged by return fire that they had to be written-off after returning to Mosul aerodrome.



Some of the RIrAF's No. 5 Squadron Breda Ba 65s lined up at Mu'askar al-Rashid aerodrome outside Baghdad. (Ahmad Sadik collection)

It was now the Iraqi Army's turn to be besieged; this time in Fallujah where Iraqi troops were first bombarded by leaflets calling upon them to surrender and then by RAF bombing raids. RAF Bristol Bombay and Vickers Valentia transports meanwhile airlifted a detachment of the King's Own Regiment to a position east of the town. The British air assault continued until the evening of 19 May when the Fallujah garrison at last surrendered with approximately 300 Iraqi soldiers being taken prisoner. In Syria, that day also saw another British air attack on al-Mizzah aerodrome outside Damascus, claiming damage to a Ju 52/3m and a Bf.110 as well as to some French aircraft.

Too late to save Fallujah, the Luftwaffe nevertheless made a major effort to halt or slow the British advance on Baghdad on 20 May, with Bf.110s and He.111s repeatedly attacking both the Habbaniya air-base and Habforce. The Messerschmitts made one particular effective attack in which a Blenheim, a DC-2 and two Valentias were destroyed; two other Blenheims being damaged. These raids resulted in two clashes between Bf.110s on one side and RAF Gladiators and Hurricanes on the other. During one of these, Lieutenant Martin Drewes claimed to have shot down a British Gladiator although in reality it was only damaged. Drewes would end the Second World War as a German night fighter expert and ace. In subsequent clashes, Hurricanes encountered He.111s and during these attacks, a French-registered, Dragon Rapide (F-AQOI) belonging to the Société de Transport du Proche Orient (a subsidiary of the Iraq Petroleum Company) was similarly damaged beyond repair.

Other clashes between the Luftwaffe and the RAF's Iraq Strike Force (now based at Habbaniya) resulted in two British reconnaissance Audaxes being forced down. One of the aircrew was killed in the dogfight and the others were shot by an Iraqi policeman who suddenly found himself confronted by three enemy fliers. Two died but the fourth was taken to an Iraqi hospital and was repatriated after the Anglo-Iraqi War was over. An RAF Gladiator was badly damaged in these clashes though the Hurricanes claimed one Bf.110 downed and a second damaged. The latter may have been the machine which was subsequently retrieved from near Fallujah. Having been towed 65kms back to Habbaniya, it was repaired to a serviceable condition before being flown to Cairo where it took part in mock dog fights with Allied aeroplanes to assess its performance.

British aircraft from Habbaniya attacked Mu'askar al-Rashid on 20 May but reported seeing no intact aeroplanes on the ground – the RIrAF having by now, dispersed elsewhere. Nevertheless, the crew of one of the British Audaxes felt they had a narrow escape when flying at low altitude during their return to Habbaniya; they saw a Bf.110 in Iraqi colours but the German crew did not see them.

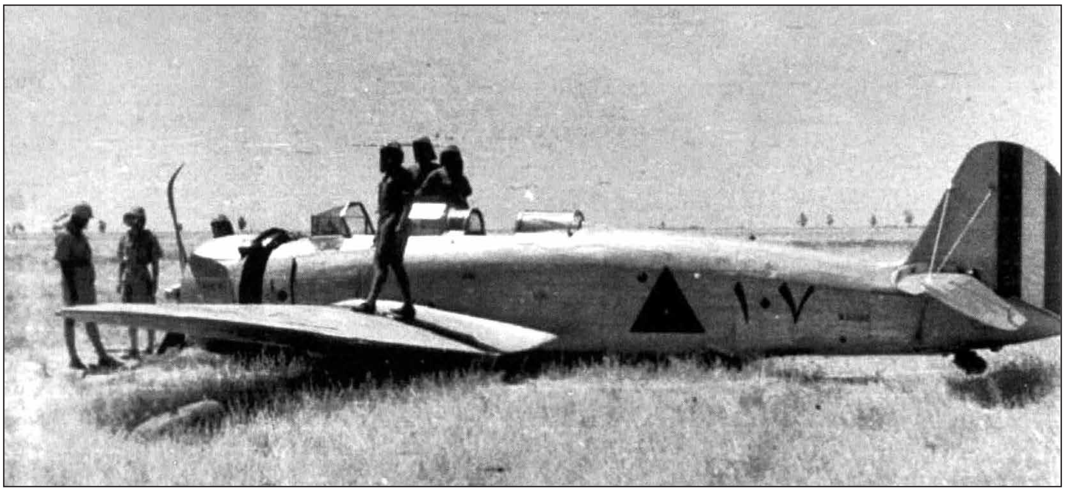
Nor was Syria neglected – recently arrived Hurricanes from Habbaniya attacking al-Mizzah aerodrome outside Damascus. Far to the west, over the Aegean, the Germans launched their airborne invasion of Crete which meant that the Luftwaffe was too busy to be able to reinforce its unit in Iraq. Junck's further requests for support were ignored.

Nevertheless, after a brief period of relative quiet, Colonel Sabbagh felt confident – or perhaps desperate – enough to order the Iraqi Army to make a determined attempt to retake Falluja on 22 May. This counter-attack was carried out by the 6th Brigade of the Iraqi 3 Division, supported by light tanks of the Mechanised Brigade. Early in the morning, Iraqi mortar fire forced the most advanced and exposed units of the British 1 King's Own Regiment to pull back into Falluja town. They were closely followed by Iraqi light tanks which were only brought to a halt when two were disabled inside the built-up area – by which time Iraqi infantry had taken control of part of Fallujah.

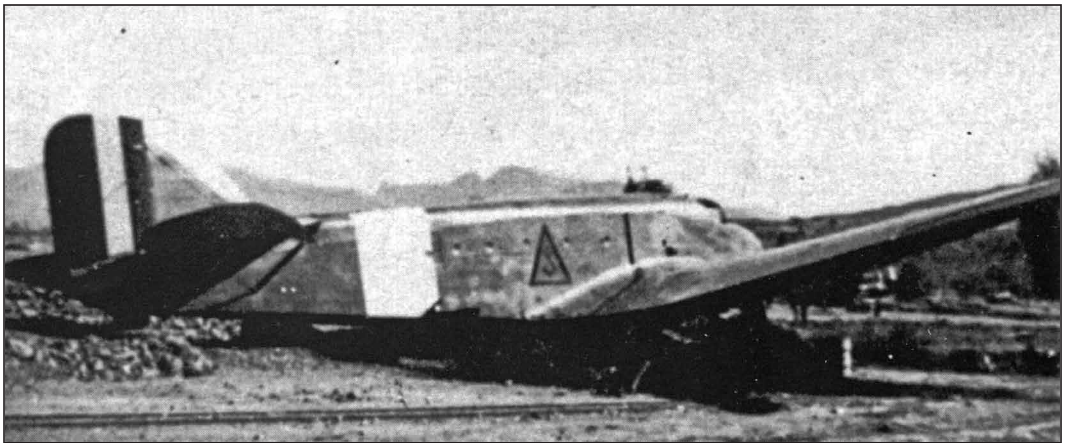
The Iraqis followed up this success by launching an equally determined assault towards the south-eastern quarter of the town but were driven off after nine hours fighting. At this point, the hard-pressed British advanced units were reinforced by others hurrying from the direction of Habbaniya. Even so, it looked as if the Iraqi attempt to retake Fallujah might succeed and in fact, it probably could have done so if support from the German Sonderkommando had arrived in time. In fact, the Germans were late and when their aircraft appeared on the scene, two Bf.110s and one He.111 were brought down by the British. On the other side, the airmen from Habbaniya launched 56 sorties and lost just one machine: an Audax flown by a Greek flying instructor who was brought down by Iraqi ground fire outside Fallujah town.

Exhausted and perhaps now dispirited, the Iraqi Army withdrew in the direction of Baghdad. Their casualties are unknown but about 100 soldiers were taken prisoner by Habforce, along with six light armoured vehicles. Elsewhere, one of two RAF Hurricanes that had been sent to attack Mosul aerodrome was lost but as neither the Germans nor the RIrAF claimed its destruction, this Hurricane probably fell to Iraqi ground fire.

Later that day, the crew of an RAF Blenheim which had similarly been sent to attack Mosul airfield, reported being attacked by a single-engine monoplane. Assuming that their identification was correct, this must have been an Iraqi Douglas 8A-4 or Breda Ba 65. Unfortunately, the precise area where this interception took place is not known but as some of the RIrAF's Douglas 8A-4s had been dispersed to Irbil, some 75km south-east of Mosul, one of these machines seems the most likely candidate, if indeed, the Iraqi Douglases had now acquired guns.



According to British reports, the Breda Ba 65 was a very demanding aeroplane to fly, as apparently confirmed by the number of Iraqi Bredas which made emergency or wheels-up landing. These included number 107, which is seen here in an Iraqi field. (Garello collection)



This Savoia Marchetti SM 81 number A.310, already wearing RIrAF insignia, was reportedly to have served as an airborne radio station in the Regia Aeronautica's Special Iraq Squadron. However, the high-powered radio set was damaged when the aeroplane made a heavy landing at Rhodes on 25th May 1941. (Garello collection)

It was also on 22 May that the Italian Regia Aeronautica contingent was at last, ready to take part in the struggle over Iraq. It was commanded by Colonel Sbernadori and included the 155th Fighter Squadron which had been allocated 12 factory new Fiat CR 42s (serial numbers MM 7463, 7464, 7467, 7470, 7472, 7474, 7475, 7476, 7477, 7478, 7501 and 7511). Each was equipped with an additional fuel tank, armour for the pilot and Iraqi insignia. Reorganised and redesignated as *Squadriglia Speciale Iraq* (Special Squadron Iraq), they took off from Ciampino at 1240, accompanied by a Savoia Marchetti SM 79. The Italians landed first at Vlore (then called Valona) in Albania after a two-hour flight but Ten. Contaldi's CR 42 (MM 7511) clipped a Caproni Ca 111 reconnaissance aircraft. Injured in the right eye, Bruno Contaldi was first hospitalised and then sent back to Italy.

On 23 May, the remaining aeroplanes set off towards Gadurra (Lindos) on the Italian ruled island of Rhodes where they were joined by two large SM 82 transports. These were carrying various stores and the technical ground crew. However, the Italian expedition to Iraq then remained at Rhodes for a further four days, partially due to adverse weather. Eventually, they were joined by a further two SM 82s along with the rest of the ground crew, plus two SM 81 bomber-transports. One of the latter was equipped with an especially powerful type A310 radio transmitter which would enable the Italian contingent to communicate from Iraq. However, this radio was rendered unserviceable as a result of the SM 81's heavy landing when the aircraft's undercarriage also partially collapsed. Therefore, an urgent request was sent to Italy for an emergency replacement.

In addition, the *Squadriglia Speciale Iraq* was slow to reach Iraq because the Vichy French authorities in Syria were less willing to allow Italians transit rights than they were to allow the same to Germans. Not until 23 May was an agreement reached but now, the Italian Fiat CR 42 fighters were delayed at Rhodes by bad weather.

On that same day, the German Sonderkommando Junck took to the air again, strafing British columns as they moved east from Habbaniya and Fallujah. Although they did little damage on the ground, the German crews claimed to have shot down two RAF Gladiators while admitting the loss of one Bf.110. British RAF Hurricanes from Habbaniya claimed to have downed two Heinkels while admitting the loss of one Gladiator, brought down by Iraqi ground fire. Sonderkommando Junck was now acutely short of spares, fuel and other equipment so, with just one He.111 still operational, the Luftwaffe's expeditionary force in Iraq was for a while, out of the fight. Furthermore, part of the British Habforce had been sent northwards across the desert, cutting the main road between Baghdad and Mosul,

On the other hand, agreement with the Vichy French finally authorised in Syria, it was possible for the Italian SM 82 transport aircraft to fly desperately needed weapons to the Iraqis on 24, 25 and 28 May. These included a number of artillery pieces. Meanwhile the RAF continued its offensive, not only in Iraq but in Syria as well, setting fire to a Luftwaffe Ju 52/3m on the ground at Nairab aerodrome east of Aleppo on 24 May.

By 25 May, the cause of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) and his supporters, the Golden Square of senior Iraqi generals, was clearly faltering and British forces were approaching Baghdad. At the same time, the remaining 11 Fiat CR 42 biplane fighters of the Italian expeditionary force, landed at Aleppo in neighbouring Syria. Here, they were greeted by the Italian consul, some German officers and a member of the Italian-French Armistice Commission. The Fiats would only stay for one night. Around this time, the Vichy French government also decided that it was time to challenge the RAF's free-ranging operations across Syria and Lebanon and so sent four Morane Saulnier MS406 fighters of GCI/7 to a small airfield near Aleppo. Further reinforcements were meanwhile on their way from Algeria in the form of approximately 24 Dewoitine D520 fighters of GCIII/6.

On 26 May, the 11 Fiat CR 42s of the 155th Squadriglia took off on the final leg of their journey to Mosul and from there, to the RIrAF's

Mu'askar al-Hurriyah aerodrome outside Kirkuk. This may have been selected because it had previously been the home of the Iraqis' only fighter squadron, No. 4, which was currently at Khan Bani Sa'ad between Baghdad and Baquba. The Fiats were thrown into action immediately, although it seems hardly credible that they could have attacked British forces advancing on Baghdad on the same day that they had flown from Aleppo via Mosul. Also, on the 26th, as British troops moved steadily forwards towards Baghdad and Mosul, RAF machines continued to attack Mu'askar al-Rashid outside the Iraqi capital. As there was effectively no longer a RIrAF presence at this aerodrome, the British raids may have been primarily to further undermine morale in Baghdad. Oberst Werner Junck also sent his last operational He.111 against Habbaniya but this inflicted minimal damage and shortly after returning to Mu'askar al-Firnas, it was destroyed in a British air attack.

Italian aircraft were certainly in action from Tuesday 27 May onwards. By that date, the German air contingent in Iraq had been almost neutralised by the RAF's relentless offensive so it fell to the newly arrived Italians to keep up the struggle in support of Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani). The Fiat fighters of the Italian 'Air Force Iraq' air units were now based at Kirkuk. Two SM 81s and the single SM 79 were normally stationed at Mosul and Aleppo. Meanwhile, early on the 27th, Junck and other German officials in Iraq agreed that it was time for what remained of the Luftwaffe Sonderkommando to leave the country, informing the Iraqi government of this decision the following day, 28 May 1941.

On 26 May, the *New York Times* newspaper had reported that the deposed Regent of Iraq, Prince Abd al-Ilah, had called upon Iraq's religious and tribal leaders, the army and the police, to rise up against the 'insurgent government' of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani). Within Iraqi there was increasing confusion, with a new acting commander of the RIrAF being appointed on 27 May. Whether this change had the authority of the child-King Faisal II is uncertain. It probably reflected a political struggle in the upper echelons of Iraq's military hierarchy as it became clear that al-Gaylani (Kaylani)'s government would soon fall.

The new Acting CO of the RIrAF was *Za'im* (Brig.) Khalid Mahmud al-Zahawi who had briefly commanded the Air Force from 18 June to 2 November 1936, afterwards serving in various senior positions as a loyal servant of King Ghazi. Nevertheless, Iraqi Air Force records indicate that Mahmud Salman al-Janabi officially remained Commander of the Iraqi Air Force until 29 September 1941 when was brought back to Iraq for trial. Shortly after that, Khalid Mahmud al-Zahawi would be sent to Afghanistan as Iraq's Minister Ambassador in Kabul on 2 December 1942.

Within a day or so of their arrival in Syria, the newly arrived French MS406 fighters shot down a RAF reconnaissance Blenheim on 28 May and later on the same day, escorted four German Ju 52/3ms bringing supplies to Nairab outside Aleppo – or at least they tried to. Apparently, the German aircrew had not been informed that Vichy-ruled Syria was now defended by modern French monoplane fighters and so kept shooting at the Morane Saulniers when they came too close. Fortunately, no damage was caused. Away in north-eastern Iraq, a British air attack on Kirkuk claimed to have bombed a Bf.110 on the ground and to have strafed two unidentified monoplanes. One of the RAF aircrew also reported seeing a single-engine monoplane taking off, although this did not attempt an interception. Once again, the British pilot was either mistaken in his identification of the machine in question or there were still Iraqi aircraft in flying condition at Kirkuk.

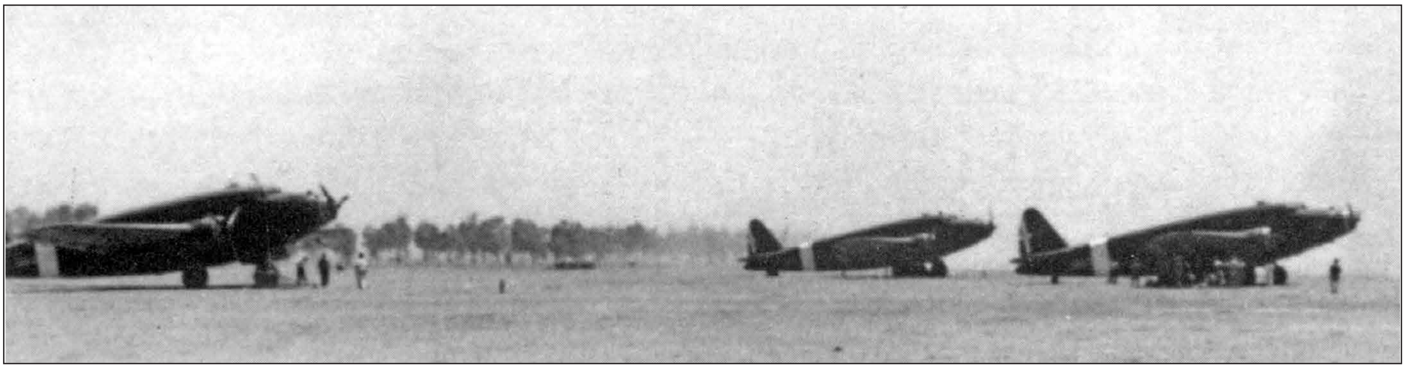
Although the Italians had arrived too late to change the course of the conflict, they quickly made their presence felt. On 29 May, in response to an urgent request from the Iraqi Army, three Fiat CR 42s took to the air. They were flown by Porcù, Valentini and Squarzoni (a different Italian source names *Teniente* De Merich as one of the Fiat pilots; he was subsequently killed flying a Reggianne Re 2001 over Malta in 1942). Their task was an armed reconnaissance towards Habbaniya, 270km from their own base at Kirkuk. During this mission, they attacked an RAF formation of three Audaxes escorted by two Gladiators which had, for its part, been sent to attack Iraqi positions at Khan Nuqata which were holding up the main British thrust towards Baghdad. One Audax was forced to make an emergency landing with its observer-gunner wounded but then, a Gladiator flown by Wg. Cdr. Wightman shot down the CR 42 (number MM 7476) of *Sototenente* Valentini. The Italian baled out safely and was taken prisoner while the two other Fiats got back to Kirkuk although both had assorted bullet holes. For their part, the Italian optimistically claimed the downing of two Gladiators plus another probably destroyed.

Such was the threat posed by the Italian air contingent that the RAF was promptly sent to attack Kirkuk aerodrome although apparently without effect. Elsewhere, it was becoming obvious that the 'Rashid Ali Rebellion', as the British called this conflict, was doomed. In fact, the British Habforce reached the outskirts of the Iraqi capital on 30 May. Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) and around 40 of his senior and most dedicated supporters including Mahmud Salman al-Janabi (the CO of the RIrAF), fled to neighbouring neutral Iran, crossing the frontier on 30 May. The Mayor of Baghdad now asked the British for a truce to be followed by negotiations.

British forces were soon heading northwards from Baghdad towards Mosul and threatened to isolate Kirkuk. Outside Mosul itself, the German *Flieger fuhrer Irak* was making urgent and less than successful attempts to extract itself, having already lost all of its Bf.110s, destroyed or damaged five of its original nine He.111s and two or more of its Ju 52/3m transports. Oberst Junck's ground crews made the two surviving (but damaged) He.111 fit to fly and these left Iraq on the 29th, reaching Rhodes via Aleppo. The other German personnel, including surviving aircrew who no longer had aeroplanes to fly, followed in six Ju 52s, the evacuation being protected by Italian fighters. In fact, only four German aircraft reportedly reached Greece with their crews, one of the Heinkels being obliged to remain in Vichy-controlled Beirut after failing to complete its flight to Greece.

Also on 29 May, Italian CR 42s attacked three British Audaxes and forced one of them down. This was followed by another RAF strike against Mu'askar al-Firnas aerodrome outside Mosul which caused little damage. Nevertheless, the Italians now also recognised that the Axis cause in Iraq was lost and decided to leave. Meanwhile, the German ambassador in Iraq, Fritz Grobba, who had requested and subsequently coordinated the Axis military intervention in Iraq, crossed into Syria. Elsewhere, another British column was closing in on Kirkuk.

In fact, the Italian expeditionary force would prove better able to extract itself from the collapse of the 'Rashid Ali Rebellion' than had the Germans. Before it did, they were again called upon to carry out an armed reconnaissance of the approaches to Baghdad. Seven Fiat CR42s were sent from Kirkuk and soon saw numerous tents and columns of troops close to the Iraqi capital. They were not intercepted but on landing back at Kirkuk the unsuitable nature of the ground resulted in damage to one aeroplane (MM 7463) and the destruction of another (MM 7477).



Three of the four Savoia Marchetti SM 82 transports which supported the Regia Aeronautica's Squadriglia Speciale Iraq. Unlike other Italian aircraft involved in the unrealistic "Mission IQ", they still have Italian national markings and are seen here at Aleppo late in May 1941. (Garello collection)

That afternoon, four of the Italian pilots, Porcù, De Merich, Dondi and Sala flew the Regia Aeronautica's last military mission in Iraq, attacking troops and armoured vehicles at the very gates of Baghdad. That evening came news that other British units were racing northwards towards Mosul and Kirkuk. It was clearly time to leave so the Italian airmen and ground crews were warned to get ready for a hurried departure the following morning. Their time in Iraq may have been short but they had brought down a number of British aeroplanes and believed they had destroyed several more. Elsewhere on 30 May, the handful of surviving Iraqi Gladiators reportedly made several ineffective strafing attacks on the advancing British.

It was probably before Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) fled the country that he expressed his hope of continuing the struggle against what he saw as a renewed British occupation of Iraq. Whether he really expected to be able to continue fighting in and around Mosul is unknown. The Italian ambassador had certainly been asked to send a request to Rome for more Breda Ba 65s and Savoia Marchetti SM 79 bombers, the latter to include either the twin or three engine versions or both, pointing out that the RIrAF had pilots and aircrew capable of operating such machines. Although the Italians knew that such an idea was unrealistic, they were urged by their Iraqi allies to commit 36 Caproni Ca. 135 bombers or from 30 to 40 smaller Caproni Ca. 311 reconnaissance bombers.

Part of the RIrAF's No. 1 (Army Coop) Squadron was still based at Mosul under its CO, Abd al-Hamid Ammar but when Iraqi resistance collapsed, he and several of his pilots and ground crews drove overland to Syria. Here, it has been claimed, they planned to regroup and launch attacks on the British from across the border. In fact, they were promptly arrested by the French and having been moved from prison to prison, ended up in Aleppo. A few months later, they were all handed back to the Iraqi authorities.

Hostilities actually ended on 31 May 1941 but once an armistice had been signed, rioting broke out in several parts of Baghdad. Al-Gaylani (Kaylani)'s remaining supporters surrendered to the British while captured British personnel, including several men from downed RAF aircraft, were released. The last German personnel left northern Iraq for Syria on 31 May, making their way overland to Aleppo. It is also worth noting that the debacle in Iraq was the first defeat suffered by the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean or Middle Eastern arenas of conflict.

Meanwhile, two Italian Fiat CR 42s were still at Kirkuk in a damaged condition. Although one of these machines only had a single bullet hole, this was in the main fuel tank so it was decided that neither aeroplane could be saved. Therefore, they were burnt before the rest of 155 Squadriglia departed for Aleppo, thus leaving the wrecks of three Fiat CR 42s (MM 7470, 7473 and 7477) on the aerodrome. *Teniente* Bertotto and Guza also left Iraq. Seven serviceable Fiat fighters took off at dawn on 31 May, soon followed by the SM 79 with some of the ground crew and the SM 81 with its new high-powered radio set. The three Fiat pilots who had no machines to fly, joined the rest of the ground crew in two buses to drive overland to Syria via Mosul.

Whether the CR 42s really gave cover to the convoy seems unlikely but they did escort the two Savoia Marchettis. On landing at the aerodrome east of Aleppo, the Italians were told by a German (not a French) officer to disperse their aeroplanes at the southern side of the airfield. Later that day, the RAF again attacked Aleppo and caught the SM 79, still in its Iraqi national markings, on the ground. It was destroyed; the final victim of the always unrealistic 'Mission IQ'.

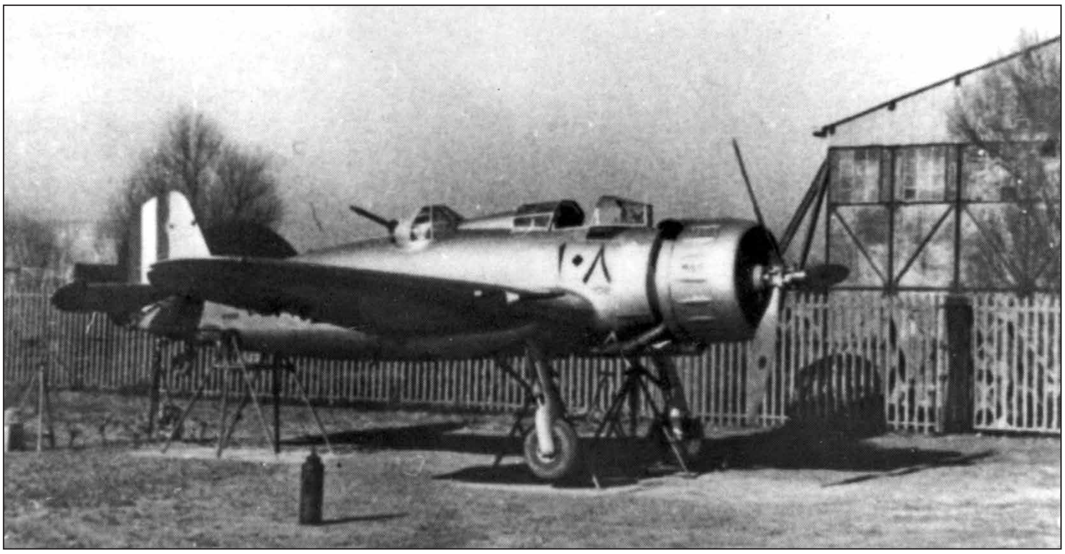
Strong westerly winds meant that the little Fiat fighters could not continue their homeward flight until 5 June. Even so, it was a long journey taking three and three-quarter hours but on reaching the safety of Italian ruled Rhodes, their RIrAF markings were replaced by those of the Regia Aeronautica. The surviving Fiat CR 42s of 155 Squadriglia were also renumbered as 164 Squadriglia and still under the command of *Capitano* Francesco ('Ciccio') Sforza, became part of 161 Gruppo Autonomo (Rodi [Rhodes]). Of the 11 Fiat CR 42, two Savoia Marchetti SM 81s and one Savoia Marchetti SM 79 originally sent to Iraq and Syria, one CR 42 had been lost in air combat, three abandoned and destroyed at Kirkuk while the SM 79 was destroyed at Aleppo. They had carried out some successful ground attack missions and claimed to have shot down two RAF Gladiators.

2

REBUILDING THE RIrAF (JUNE 1941 – DECEMBER 1942)

The failure of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani)'s attempt to expel the British left a significant number of Iraqi military personnel far away in Axis controlled Europe. Some had been sent there on military missions or for special training. Amongst them was Breda Ba 65 pilot Jawad Fattah (perhaps the same man as Jawad Husayn) who now asked to join a newly established 'Arab Legion' under the Italian flag to fight against the British. Apparently, he hoped that this force would even have its own air element. This never happened but with 1,700 flying hours and combat experience on the Breda Ba 65 to his credit, Jawad Fattah might have made a suitable leader.

A RIrAF Breda Ba 65 again raised on trestles for testing, but here seen with its undercarriage lowered. The machine appears to be serial number 108. (Albert Grandolini collection)



Another view of Breda Ba 65 number 108 of the RIrAF's No. 5 Squadron during ground testing. A small number of Bredas continued serving in Iraq through the mid-1940s. (Albert Grandolini collection)

As a mysterious postscript to this story, a secret coded message was reportedly sent to the Italian government in Rome by the Italian consul in Aleppo, dated 8 June 1941. It stated that;

> A [Savoia Marchetti SM] 79 arrived this morning with General Ibrahim Pasha al-Rawi and four other Iraqi officials … Among them, the well-known pilot Maj. Ibrahim Jawad [either the ex-CO of the RIrAF's No. 6 Squadron, or an error for Jawad Fattah, late CO of No. 5 Squadron], known as being anti-English. Apparently, the mission came to us to negotiate the purchase of arms … I have recommended that they return to Rhodes, because they risked internment [by the French in Syria] … At 1300 hours they are due to head in that direction.

However, the idea that the Savoia Marchetti SM 79 in which Jawad and his associates flew to Aleppo was a RIrAF survivor of the May 1941 Anglo-Iraqi War, seems very implausible.

On 1 June 1941, Brigadier General Sami Fattah al-Musli was appointed the new commander of the RIrAF. The so-called Rashid Ali Rebellion had been very expensive for the RIrAF although mostly in terms of aeroplanes lost rather than personnel killed or injured. Most of No. 1 Squadron's officers had fled to Syria while the unit's remaining Audaxes were moved from Mosul to Baghdad as soon as the situation had calmed down. Thus, the unit remained in existence. No. 2 Squadron had lost all its aircraft – either completely destroyed or rendered unusable, including part of what had been the Independent Vincent Flight. Nevertheless, both these squadrons were effectively only 'numberplates'. No. 5 Squadron still had five intact but unserviceable Ba 65s, while four of No. 6 Squadron's Savoia Marchetti SM 79Bs had been destroyed and one was badly damaged. The latter would be repaired but would then be lost due to other causes. All that currently remained in flying condition were four of No. 4 Squadron's Gladiators (six according to Iraqi sources which probably included damaged or unserviceable machines). At least one of the latter was soon brought back into flying condition.

As far as is known, all the Flying School's machines had been destroyed or damaged. Other sources suggested that there were still around seven different kinds of De Havilland Moths, plus some miscellaneous machines which could be repaired. Furthermore, only 10 of the original 30 flying cadets in the School's eighth course were still in the area. All the flying instructors had either been killed during the fighting or had fled to neighbouring Syria or Iran. In fact, it would be another six years before anyone received their wings at the RIrAF Flying School.

Of course, the RIrAF's losses in materiel were far greater than its losses in personnel. The impact of that short but intense conflict upon the Iraqi Air Force's confidence and political cohesion was more difficult to calculate but was thought to be devastating. The inability of the RIrAF to compete with the British RAF, while certainly not unexpected, nevertheless had a devastating impact upon Iraqi military morale and on Arab, rather than solely Iraqi, prestige. The respected historian Gerald Butt has gone as far as to suggest that it contributed to 'a sense of failure and despair that were to permeate the Arabs towards the end of the century'.

Meanwhile in the Kurdish regions of northern and eastern Iraq, the tumultuous events in the largely Arab parts of the country encouraged Shaikh Mahmud Barzanji, the exiled self-styled King of Kurdistan, to return to the ancestral village from which he had been obliged to flee in May 1932. He would remain in this area until his death in 1956, a thorn in the side of both the Iraqi government and its British allies. For the RIrAF the remaining years of the Second World War were a period of reconstruction. It started from an extremely low base but latterly, also involved the Iraqi Air Force in that most traditional of tasks; namely containing yet another Kurdish uprising in the north of the country.

On 1 June *Za'im* Khalid Mahmud al-Zahawi, the acting CO of the RIrAF was replaced by *Muqaddam* (Maj. General) Sami Abd al-Fattah who would also be promoted to the rank of *Aqid*. Sami Fattah would become the longest serving Commander of the Iraqi Air Force, remaining in post until 2 May 1954. Meanwhile al-Zahawi would be sent to Afghanistan as the country's Minister Commissioner – in other words ambassador – on 2 December 1942. Now, however, the Iraqis had to rebuild their air force, assisted, guided by and indeed under the control of, the British.

As soon as the Iraqi Army and the RIrAF were in a position to do so, they were sent against the persistently 'rebellious' Kurds of northern and north-eastern Iraq. Meanwhile, the country remained a vital link in the network of British Imperial and subsequently, of Allied air communications. It also served as a base for some other Allied military operations, none of which involved the Iraqi armed forces.

The British invasion of Vichy French-ruled Syria and Lebanon (8 June to 14 July 1941) was largely launched from Palestine and Transjordan, although Iraqi territory was also used. Those British and Imperial units which had advanced into Iraq from Basra in the south, came to be known as Iraq Force – re-designated the Iraq Command on 21 June.

On 1 September 1941, this command was again redesignated as Persia and Iraq Force or Paiforce and played a leading role in the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, then known as Persia, during August and September 1941.

The efforts by Shah Reza Pahlavi of Persia/Iran to modernise and strengthen his country's armed forces during the interwar years had achieved much but not enough to fight on two fronts against two of the world's strongest powers, the British Empire and the USSR. In fact, some commentators have suggested that the pre-war Persian Iranian Army and Air Force had largely focused upon repressing the people in assorted frontier regions – especially the Shah's not particularly loyal subjects. Before the actual British and Soviet invasion of the country, the RAF dropped propaganda leaflets in Persian military units, calling upon them not to fight because their country was not really being threatened. Instead, these leaflets claimed that Persia was about to be freed from potential destruction by the Nazi Germans. Next came a sudden assault which gave the Persians little time to organise much in the way of a defence.

Early in the morning of 25 August, RAF aeroplanes bombed Tehran, Qazvin and some other towns while also dropping more leaflets urging the Persians to surrender. Meanwhile, Soviet aircraft bombed Tabriz, Adabil, Rasht and elsewhere. Several hundred people were killed or injured, most of them civilians. It was by no means the most glorious page in the annals of British history or indeed of the Soviet Union, although it may have been justified in light of the overall strategic needs of the Second World War.

Without available allies and with the Shah refusing to destroy the bridges, roads and railways that he had so painstakingly constructed over the preceding decades, the Persian Army and Imperial Air Force were rapidly overwhelmed or brushed aside. Within a short while, British and Soviet forces met west of Hamadan and at Qazwin on 30 and 31 August, Reza Shah Pahlavi having now ordered his men to stop fighting. He was then forced to abdicate on 16 September, handing over to his son Muhammad Reza who would remain Shah until the Islamic Revolution of January 1979.

Thereafter Persia/Iran served as a vital channel for supplies being sent to the beleaguered Soviet Union. It was also regarded as a potential area of forward defence in case the Germans and their allies broke through the Caucasus to threaten the British-dominated Arab Middle East. On 18 August 1942, General Maitland Wilson was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Persia and Iraq Command, with the job of securing 'at all costs' oil fields and other oil installations in both Iraq and Persia from land or air attack. He also had to ensure the transportation of supplies to the USSR from the Persian Gulf ports remained uninterrupted. However, his orders made it clear that aid to the Soviet Union was of secondary importance, compared with securing the British Imperial position in the Gulf region and Middle East as a whole.

In the event, the German invasion of the USSR was halted at the Battle of Stalingrad (23 August 1942 to 2 February 1943) and was then rolled back. Thereafter, the British military presence in Persia/Iran largely consisted of lines of communication units. However, the British presence in neighbouring Iraq would remain for some time after the Second World War, only ending in October 1947.

The story of the Royal Iraqi Air Force after the Anglo-Iraqi War of May 1941 was a difficult and divisive one. Following defeat by the British the commanding officer of the RIrAF, Lieutenant Colonel Mahmud Salman al-Janabi was amongst those who had fled to Iran. He was then arrested in Tehran in August 1941, probably during or immediately after the Anglo-Soviet invasion of the country and was sent back to Iraq. Al-Janabi and several others were then interned in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) by the British. Otherwise, the administrative structure of the RIrAF remained essentially unchanged.

At the squadron level, *Ra'is Awal (Ra'id) Tayyar* Majdi al-Din Abd al-Rahman al-Naqib was placed in charge of what remained of No. 1 (Army Coop.) Squadron According to an Iraqi source, he would remain in this post until 1947. However, a British Advisory Mission Report of late 1942 gives *Ra'is* Nazim Siddiq as the Officer Commanding No. 1 Squadron at that time while the Iraqi source also states that *Ra'id Tayyar* Majdi al-Din al-Naqib soon became CO of No. 7 Squadron At the end of the Anglo-Iraqi War, most of No. 1 Squadron's officers had fled to Syria overland by car, apparently hoping to join the forces which they believed were mustering in eastern Syria for a counter-attack against the British in Iraq. In fact, there were no such forces – and no such counter-attack. Instead, these men were apprehended by French troops, ended up in prison in Aleppo and a few months later, found themselves sent back to the Iraqis under arrest.

No. 2 (Trans.) Squadron had three aeroplanes left, including one Vickers Vincent which continued to be used for communications and transport purposes until the end of The Second World War. On the other hand, Iraqi sources state that the Independent Vincent Flight still existed, being under the command of Lieutenant Ghiath al-Ramadhani until 1946. Apparently, the solitary Vincent now formed an autonomous Flight within No. 2 Squadron until the machine was damaged beyond repair by floodwater in 1946.

No. 3 (Army Coop.) Squadron had also lost most of its machines, the three surviving and currently almost certainly unserviceable

Nisrs were handed over to No. 4 Squadron Meanwhile, No. 3 itself was 'shelved' – in other words, ceasing to exist except as a numberplate.

No. 4 (Fight.) Squadron, having done well during the Anglo-Iraq War, was put under the command of Captain Hilmi Abd al-Wahab who until 1943, led what was left of the unit. No. 4 Squadron also moved back to its original home at Kirkuk aerodrome but with only five or six Gladiators the unit could not train as a proper squadron. Production of the Gladiator had ceased and as yet the British were unwilling to hand over any from RAF stocks. As a result, No. 3 Squadron's remaining Hawker Nisrs were given to No. 4 Squadron but even these did not arrive at Kirkuk until 29 October 1941. For a while, No. 4 Squadron therefore consisted of two parts, a First Flight with Gladiators and a Second Flight with Nisrs.

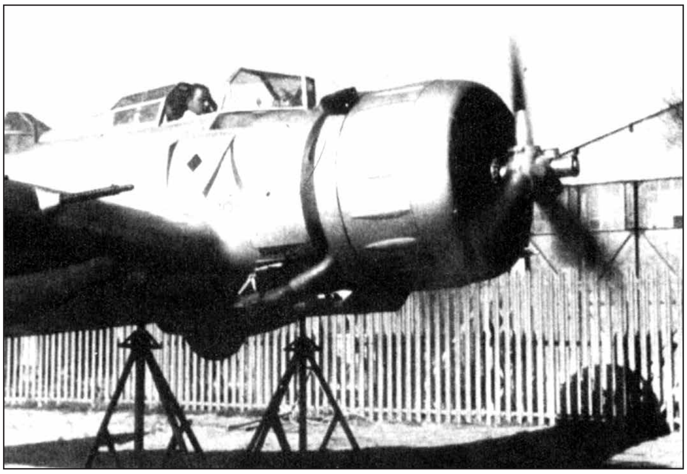
No. 5 (Ground Attack) Squadron ended the Anglo-Iraq War with five, more or less, intact Breda Ba 65s. All were reportedly unserviceable while repair and maintenance was extremely difficult because they were Italian and so spare parts for them could not be purchased. It was eventually decided that No. 5 Squadron should also be 'shelved'; its men and equipment being distributed around other RIrAF units. During this difficult process, No. 5 Squadron was apparently commanded by Major Hifzi Aziz who, having previously led No. 5 from 1938 to some time prior to the Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) 'coup', returned to perhaps nominal command until the squadron was disbanded in December 1944.

No. 6 (Bomb.). Squadron had one Savoia Marchetti SM 79B remaining. This had been damaged during a British bombing raid but after the Anglo-Iraqi War was over, great effort was put into making it airworthy. However, the SM 79 failed to lift off and instead crashed into the southern bund or flood protection embankment of Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid) aerodrome. The machine was damaged but not written off and there were no serious injuries. There is nevertheless, considerable uncertainty about the date and seriousness of this accident. For example, Report No. 40 by the British Advisory Mission, dated 11 November 1942, indicated that it occurred at some time during that year, stating:

> There was one flying accident during the quarter when a Savoia 79 failed to leave the ground. The aircraft after running the whole length of Rashid Aerodrome hit the bund and crashed outside the aerodrome. The aircraft was a total wreck but nobody was hurt. The pilot was Muqaddam Bahjit Ra'uf. A Court of Enquiry is proceeding.

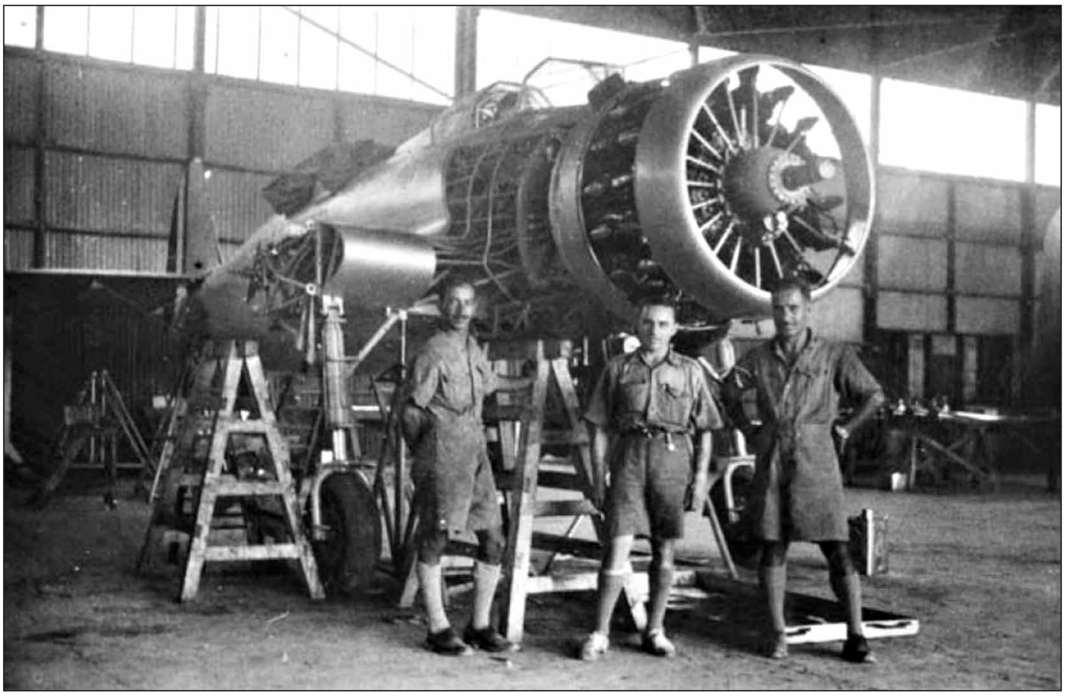
What is certain is that No. 6 Squadron now had no aircraft and was therefore disbanded.

No. 7 (Fighter-Bomb.) Squadron, like No. 4 (Fighter) Squadron, emerged from the May 1941 conflict with some of its aeroplanes reasonably intact. *Ra'id* Mahmud Hindi remained in charge until 2 October 1941. There then seems to have been a gap of a few weeks before *Ra'id* Majdi al-Din al-Naqib took over command on 4 December, remaining in post until 1947.


While recovering from the Anglo-Iraqi War of 1941, the RIrAF ground personnel had its hands full with the search for spares and whatever was left of the force's aircraft. Extensive efforts were invested into the recovery of remaining equipment, though usually with only limited success: if for no other reason than because the British occupation authorities limited the flying to few hours a month per pilot. This Ba.65 was photographed while its engine was undergoing a test-run on the ground. (Albert Grandolini collection)

Despite some significant changes in the RIrAF's command structure, the considerable loss of aeroplanes suffered during the Anglo-Iraq War meant that the Iraqis had enough pilots and aircrew, plus ground crews and administrative staff, to operate what remained. Nevertheless, the training of new personnel came to a virtual standstill for some time. What was really needed was replacement aeroplanes and the most important of these would be a small number of Gloster Gladiators. The first may have been a machine with the ex-RAF serial number N5827 although it is possible that this Gladiator may actually have been handed over to the RIrAF before the so-called, 'Rashid Ali Revolt'.

The speed with which the British were willing to revive their Air Advisory Mission to Iraq may seem surprising and demonstrated an


Another of No. 5 Squadron's Ba.65s (number 110) undergoing major repair: it remains unclear if this photograph was taken before or after the Anglo-Iraq War. (Albert Grandolini collection)

unexpected confidence in the reliability of the new (or perhaps more correctly, the returning old) Iraqi government. Not long after peace largely returned to Iraq, the Iraqi government requested the loan of one RAF technical officer and four NCOs for as long as they could be spared and without the formal contracts previously needed for the three-year secondments (the norm before the Anglo-Iraq War). An official British Air Ministry document marked SECRET and dated 18 November 1941, concerned the number of RAF personnel loaned to the RIrAF both before and after the 'Rashid Ali Rebellion'. It stated:

> The position is that immediately prior to the May rebellion in Iraq, there were two officers and eight airmen on loan to the Iraqi Air Force. Formerly there were 13 airmen but this had been reduced to eight in anticipation of trouble … At varying dates after the rebellion all the airmen and one officer returned to (British) RAF service.

Mahmud Salman al-Janabi, the ex-commanding officer of the RIrAF and some other leaders of the Rashid Ali coup, had been tried in absentia for treason. After they were captured in Iran or more correctly, handed over to the British, these Iraqi officers were passed to the Iraqi authorities and on 14 May 1942, al-Janabi's sentence was announced. He was hanged the next day along with General Fahmi Sa'id and Colonel Kamil Shabib. According to various sources including al-Janabi's wife, on the morning of their execution, Prince Abd al-Ilah the Regent came to the now notorious, Abu Ghraib prison where the 'rebel leaders' were being held. Wearing dark glasses, he demanded to see them one by one, before their execution. When Colonel Mahmud al-Janabi passed in front of the Prince he turned and spat on the ground, before walking on to his death.

In other respects, the year 1942 saw the fortunes of the RIrAF start to improve, despite a discouraging setback in the middle of the night of 26–27 March. Flash floods following torrential rain in the mountains remain a common feature of the Iraqi spring but this time, the flooding was even more sudden and deeper than usual. The Diyala river quickly covered a wide area around its confluence with the Tigris on the southern outskirts of Baghdad. Nearby, Mu'askar al-Rashid aerodrome largely disappeared beneath the water. This rose so quickly and with so little warning that several of the few remaining Iraqi aeroplanes were wrecked.

When the floodwater receded, No. 2 Squadron found that two of its remaining three aeroplanes had been destroyed, leaving just one machine. Consequently, this unit was also temporarily disbanded. No. 3 Squadron similarly found that it now had no serviceable Nisrs. What remained of No. 1 Squadron was transferred to Kirkuk. It returned to Mu'askar al-Rashid after about two months, by which time the aerodrome had dried out and been sufficiently repaired for flying to restart.

The British Advisory Mission was now headed by Wing Cdr. C.W.M. Ling while Flight Lieutenant Caesar of the RAF as the Technical Inspector, was responsible for sending regular reports to the Air Ministry in London, just as his opposite numbers in Egypt sent reports on the progress of the REAF. Thus, in Report No. 40 dated 30 November 1942, Caesar outlined the RIrAF's Order of Battle and noted that the Iraqi Air HQ was still in the Ministry of Defence in Baghdad. No. 1 Wing, which was in fact, the RIrAF's only Wing, was based at Hinaidi, now known to the British (as well as the Iraqis) as Mu'askar al-Rashid. The only exception was No. 4 Squadron, based at Kirkuk. The Flying Training School and Apprentices School were also at Mu'askar al-Rashid, along with the technical sections, stores section, workshop and medical section – although in practice, these schools barely now existed.

Ahmad Shawqi, seen here with his young wife, was a junior REAF pilot in 1942. He was also one of those put on a British list of suspected "less active subversives" the same year. Shawqi later rose to the rank of Air Major General in what became the UARAF. (EAF Museum collection)

Report No. 40 is particularly interesting because it includes the names of so many of the RIrAF's personnel, the great majority of whom had been in the service at the time of the Anglo-Iraqi War of May 1941. There had, however, been some changes in command. Thus, *Ra'is* Mahmud Ayyub had been appointed as Acting Officer Commanding the FTS because the previous CO, *Muqaddam* (Maj. General) Hifzi Aziz, who was also the CO of No. 5 Squadron, had entered the Iraqi Staff College. Hifzi Aziz would remain the nominal CO of No. 5 Squadron and would return to this role after leaving the Staff College.

Other promotions may also have reflected loyalty as well as capabilities, with *Ra'is Awal* Munir Abbas of the RIrAF Staff becoming a *Muqaddam* while *Ra'is* Ra'uf Hassan, the senior Armament Officer, was promoted to *Ra'is Auwal*. This meant that the RIrAF's command structure was now as follows: Officer Commanding, *Aqid* Sami Fattah; Staff Officer, *Muqaddam* Munir Abbas; SSC (meaning unclear although Abd al-Ghani was later involved in Iraqi Air Force intelligence), *Ra'is* Jihad Abdul Ghani; Paymaster, *Mulazim Awal* Ja'far Shaul; Quartermaster, *Ra'is Awal* Simon Shaul; Works Officer, *Mulazim Awal* Abd al-Rahim; Doctor, *Ra'is* Muhamad al-Shawaf.

Flight Lieutenant Caesar also referred to a No. 2 Wing which may have either been planned or may already have existed as an office at Mu'askar al-Rashid. It was supposedly commanded by *Muqadim* Bahjat Ra'uf with Ra'is Salam al-Gaylani (Kaylani) as his staff officer.

In the workshops section of the RIrAF, the Engineer Officer was *Mulazim Awal* Jasim Muhammad, supported by *Mulazim Awal* al-Hajj Muhammad as Adjutant; the other officers being *Mulazim Awal* Abd al-Rahman al-Shaikh responsible for engineering, *Mulazim Awal* Abdullah Mahmud responsible for armaments, Warrant Officer Khidhir Ahmad as paymaster and Warrant Officer Ra'uf Mustafa as quartermaster. Similarly in the technical sections, *Ra'is Awal* Ra'uf Hassan was in overall command, with *Ra'is Awal* Hassan in charge of armaments. *Ra'is* Emmanuel Eshu was in charge of navigation, *Mulazim Awal* Fathi Tawfiq in charge of photography, *Mulazim Awal* Isma'il Muhammad in charge of motorised transport, *Mulazim Awal* Majid Mushri and *Mulazim Awal* Hadi Awad sharing responsibility for wirelesses. *Ra'is Awal* Bashir Sidqi was in command of the Stores Section, supported by *Mulazim Awal Wahbi* Samil *Mulazim Awal* Iyshad Majidd, *Mulazim Awal* Shawqi, *Mulazim Thani* Jamal Abd al-Wahhab and *Mulazim Thani* Fathi Kadri, each of whom was responsible for a particular numbered 'group' of stores.

According to the RAF Air Advisory Mission Report No. 40, the strength of the RIrAF at the end of October 1942 stood at 25 serviceable aeroplanes, 36 unserviceable. The latter probably included those at the Aircraft Depot's Repair and Overhaul section at Mu'askar al-Rashid; namely one Gladiator, five Tiger Moths, one Dragon, one Vincent and one Rapide.

Meanwhile a lack of volunteers for the RIrAF – presumably reflecting its diminished prestige following the Anglo-Iraq War – was causing problems in several parts of the air force. This would gradually be overcome, not least through the acquisition of additional ex-RAF aeroplanes. Not that the traffic in aircraft was all in one direction. In March 1942, for example, an Iraqi Gloster Gladiator bearing the ex-RAF serial number K6140 was returned to the RAF. How long it had been in the RIrAF is unknown, while other sources indicate that two Iraqi Gladiators were actually returned to the RAF. On 10 September, five distinctly patched and worn ex-RAF Gloster Gladiators were handed over to the Iraqis, which enabled No. 4 Squadron to be more or less revived. Unfortunately, they arrived without spare parts and as the Gladiator had long been out of production, nothing more could be expected. Flight Lieutenant Caesar's Report No. 40 stated that three other ex-RAF Gladiators Mk. IIs were handed over as a 'gift' by the British in mid-January, while other sources stated that Gladiators numbered K7907, K7929 and K7989 were delivered to the RIrAF in December 1942 and were still in Iraqi service in 1943.

At the time of the Anglo-Iraq War, the RIrAF's Flying Training School was training its eighth intake or cohort. After the fighting ended and *Za'im* Khalid Mahmud al-Zahawi took temporary command of what remained of the RIrAF, he found that only 10 or so of the 30 enrolled students remained. All the training aeroplanes had been either destroyed or rendered unserviceable while all the instructors had either been killed during the fighting or had fled to neighbouring countries. However, some already seem to have returned as most of the eighth cohort eventually graduated. The FTS then closed its doors to new cadets for the next six years and trained no new pilots.

On the other hand, the surviving staff of the FTS remained but according to Flight Lieutenant Caesar's Report No. 40, they no longer had a commanding officer. Instead, there was just the Adjutant, *Ra'is* Jalal Ja'far, the Paymaster *Mulazim Awal* Haidar Amin, the Quartermaster *Mulazim Thani* Husain Ali, the commanders of the two training flights, *Ra'is* Mahmud Ayyub and Ra'is Abd al-Khalik al-Sa'dun and their two flying instructors, *Mulazim Awal* Faraj Kilani and *Mulazim Awal* Khalaf Janabi still in post. The FTS staff also included 10 other men, two of whom may have been civilians, along with three remaining pupils: *Mulazim Awal* Muhammad Saba, *Mulazim Awal* Fakri Abd al-Qadir and *Mulazim Awal* Karim Hamdi. They perhaps included the disappointed young men who were sent back to their army regiments.

Equally disappointed were many young officer cadets who had been in the Military College at the time of the Anglo-Iraqi War. Amongst those who had yet to graduate was Arif Abd al-Razzaq of the college's 20 cohort. He was, nevertheless, lucky in being amongst those chosen to be sent to England to continue their training. Whether this was before or after Abd al-Razzaq was selected for the RIrAF is unclear but while in the UK, he also received his pilot's wings and went on a navigation course before returning to Iraq. Arif Abd al-Razzaq thereafter rose steadily, holding several very important positions and would eventually head the RIrAF from 14 July 1958 until 7 February 1963.

Eventually, the FTS had 12 aeroplanes, some of which must have been extensively repaired. They consisted of two DH Tiger Moths, one Magister, four Nisrs, four Douglases and a Vega Gull but none were currently serviceable. This dismal situation was summed up in Flight Lieutenant Caesar's report at the end of November 1942;

> There has been very little flying this quarter due to all the Tiger Moth aircraft requiring their tail units rebuilt after the flood of February [actually late March], 1942. Most of the time the pupils have been employed on ground training. The standard of aircraft maintenance has left much to be desired and all aircraft going to ARS for new tail units have required repairs other than those due to the flood. A few repaired aircraft have now been returned from the ARS and flying should start again at the beginning of the new quarter.

Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the flying time recorded at the FTS was a mere three hours in August, seven in September and only two in October.

The story at squadron level was similar, especially for those units based at Mu'askar al-Rashid outside Baghdad which had been exposed to the recent floods. No. 1 Squadron had, in fact, been moved to Kirkuk following this deluge and remained there for about two months, by which time its home aerodrome had dried out. The Air Advisory Report at the end of November 1942 was again particularly detailed, listing the full personnel of various RIrAF units. No. 1 (Army Coop.) Squadron under *Ra'is* Nadhim Siddiq, Adjutant *Mulazim Awal* Bashir Salih, Paymaster *Mulazim Thani* Shakir Sa'id and Quartermaster Abd al-Rahman Safi. It consisted of two flights, of which No. 1 was commanded by Ra'is Ahmad al-Tik, with pilots *Mulazim Awal* Abdulah Naji, *Mulazim Awal* Nadhi Kamuna, *Mulazim Awal* Jamid Tawfiq and *Mulazim Thani* Nasir Zara. The officer commanding No. 2 Flight was *Ra'is* Faiq al-Sa'di, with pilots *Mulazim Awal* Wadid Faraj, *Mulazim Awal* Yahya Mustafa, *Mulazim Awal* Hamid Shakir, *Mulazim Awal* Hamid Dabbini and *Mulazim Thani* Yawuz Salim. These men could nominally use around a dozen Hawker Nisrs and had achieved a reasonable level of flying hours given the age and condition of their machines; 70 in August, 42 in September and 80 in October.

No. 2 had now been designated a General-Purpose Squadron and although it still existed at Mu'askar al-Rashid, it had no aeroplanes of its own. In contrast, No. 3 Squadron had three serviceable and four unserviceable Nisrs but had neither a function nor a specific location, according to the British Mission Report.

No. 4 Squadron at Kirkuk had been reduced to less than a quarter of its previous fighter strength, now having five serviceable and one unserviceable Gloster Gladiator Mk. I fighters with Mercury IX engines. It now also had a Flight of surviving Hawker Nisrs with Pegasus 2M2 and VI engines. However, both these types were out of production – the Nisrs having been so for a long time. It also proved difficult to obtain spares and tools, even for the Gladiators.

No. 4 Squadron was meanwhile led by *Ra'is* Hilal Abd al-Wahhab, with Adjutant *Mulazim Awal* Shamal Abdullah, Paymaster *Mulazim Thani* Ahmad Khattab and Quartermaster *Mulazim Thani* Kaddiri Abd al-Wahhab. It also had sufficient personnel for its limited number of aeroplanes. *Mulazim Awal* Nafa Abdulla was in charge of No. 1 (Gladiator) Flight, with pilots *Mulazim Awal* Sa'id Sulaiman, *Mulazim Awal* Ibrahim Adham and *Mulazim Awal* Sadiq Azzawi. *Ra'is* Ahmad Aziz led No. 2 (Nisr) Flight with pilots *Mulazim Awal* Abdul Rahman Aziz, *Mulazim Awal* Salih Wazzan and *Mulazim Thani* Da'ud Salim. Unfortunately, the names of the observer-gunners were not mentioned.

Unfortunately, the Advisory Mission's Report of late November 1942 was damning where No. 4 Squadron was concerned, stating:

> This squadron is the only one equipped with a useful fighter aircraft and as far as can be found out, has never done any attacks, even dummy or with a camera gun: as a fighter unit this squadron is useless. Due to the shortage of Gladiator aircraft this unit has a few Audax (Nisr) and is used as an Army Cooperation Squadron. Five Gladiators are being sold to the RIrAF by the RAF and that will bring this squadron up to full strength as a fighter squadron.

Flight Lieutenant Caesar listed the unit's flying hours as 18 in August, 34 in September and 24 in October.

Remarkably, No. 5 (Fighter-Bomber) Squadron still had four Breda Ba 65s with Fiat 65 engines at Mu'askar al-Rashid. Two of them proved to be in a serviceable condition, which surely says something for the Italians' original supply of sufficient spares and maintenance equipment. One DH Rapide with Gipsy Six-I engines had also been allocated to the unit which was now commanded by *Ra'is* Khadim Abadi, with Adjutant *Mulazim Awal* Juha Dawisha, Paymaster *Warrant Officer* Mahdi Salih, Quartermaster *Mulazim Thani* Mari Abdullah. *Ra'is* Jihad Shakir was in charge of Number One Flight while *Ra'is* Nadhim Mishtaq was in charge of Number Two Flight. No other pilots were mentioned in the Advisory Mission Report but nevertheless No. 5 Squadron still flew nine hours in August, 26 in September and 19 in October. Flight Lieutenant Caesar's comment that No. 5 Squadron really only existed in name was, therefore, a bit misleading and in fact, one or more of the Bredas still flew although not often. Caesar's prejudice against the Breda was also clear;

> This squadron … consists of four Breda 65 and one Rapide aircraft. The latter aircraft is the only one which does much flying and is used for communication, the remaining are just flown around the aerodrome on circuits and landings with as few landings as possible as every pilot is at heart frightened of them as it is not a nice aircraft to fly.

No. 6 Squadron existed only in the most minimal sense, having been allocated one serviceable DH Rapide in addition to the SM 79B which had been damaged about a year earlier.

No. 7 (Light Bomber) Squadron soldiered on with its five Douglas 8A-4s, powered by Wright Cyclone 1820G 103A engines. These aircraft were apparently, still without guns which casts doubt upon reports of Iraqi Douglases taking on British aircraft in air combat during the Anglo-Iraq War. All were, nevertheless, still serviceable at the time of the Advisory Mission Report at the end of November 1942.

Since 2 October 1941, No. 7 Squadron had been commanded by *Ra'is Awal* Majdi al-Naqib with Adjutant *Mulazim Awal* Jawad Hamidi, Paymaster Warrant Officer Naji Haj Hamidi and Quartermaster *Mulazim Thani* Abdullah Fathi. The OC of Number One Flight was *Rais* Midhat Abd al-Rahman with pilots *Mulazim Awal* Khalil Shafiq, *Mulazim Awal* Nafi Ahmad and *Mulazim Awal* Faiq Isma'il. The OC of Number Two Flight with the surviving Vickers Vincent was *Faiz* Ghiath al-Ramadhani with pilots *Mulazim Awal* Abd al-Hamid Ridha, *Mulazim Awal* Jamil Julius and *Mulazim Thani* Mahmud Shakir. The names of other aircrew were not mentioned.

The importance of No. 7 Squadron was such that Flight Lieutenant Caesar's comments were particularly detailed. He pointed out that this should have been an attack and light bomber squadron but noted that the Douglases had never been as effective as they should have been. In so doing, Caesar shed an interesting light on the role these aeroplanes played during the Anglo-Iraqi War of May 1941.

> Since the arrival of these aircraft in August 1940, they have never been operationally serviceable. They are now waiting for the following items: Breech blocks and units firing [sic] for Browning Guns [only enough guns received for five aircraft], installation of wireless equipment [Bendix Radio, no drawings for installation received], adaptors to carry British bombs [being helped by RAF]. The general standard of maintenance of the aircraft in this unit has been far from satisfactory and the Instructor of the Apprentice School has been lent to it for the first two months of this quarter [Oct-Dec 1942]. This has raised the standard a little but there is still a great deal of improvement necessary if it is to be a useful operational unit. An example of this bad maintenance is that an aircraft flown by Wing-Commander Ling [head of the British Advisory Mission]. It was reported to loser.p.m. [sic] after an alteration in the propeller pitch had been made, on inspection it was found that all that was required was an adjustment of the brake unit of the propeller. When the British NCO tried to adjust the break [sic] unit he found that the bolts securing the dome had not been removed for a very long time if at all since it was fitted. The propeller had been in service over two years and this dome should have been removed on a minor inspection.

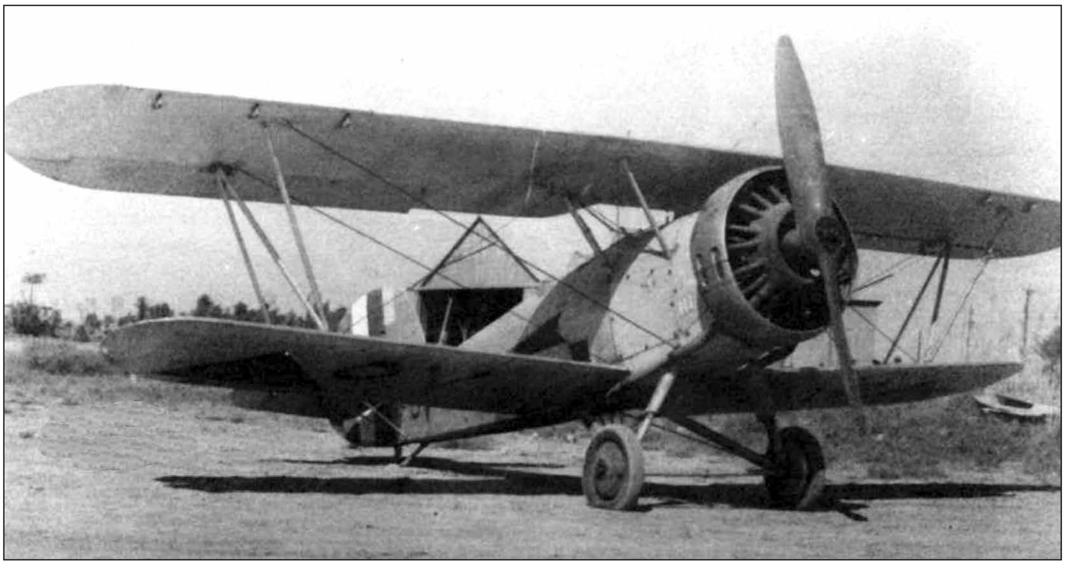
Despite such problems, No. 7 Squadron achieved 21 flying hours in August, 41 in September and 22 in October 1942.

The unusually detailed Advisory Mission Report of late November 1942 gave considerable detail concerning the technical sections of the RIrAF. It was again highly critical of all of them except the Fabric Shop, Parachute Section and to a lesser extend the Apprentices School. For example, *Ra'is Awal* Ra'uf Hassan, the head of the Armament Section, had completed a long course in the UK before the Second World War and worked very hard but in Flight Lieutenant Caesar's opinion, he was now seriously handicapped by not having the assistance of an RAF non-commissioned officer.

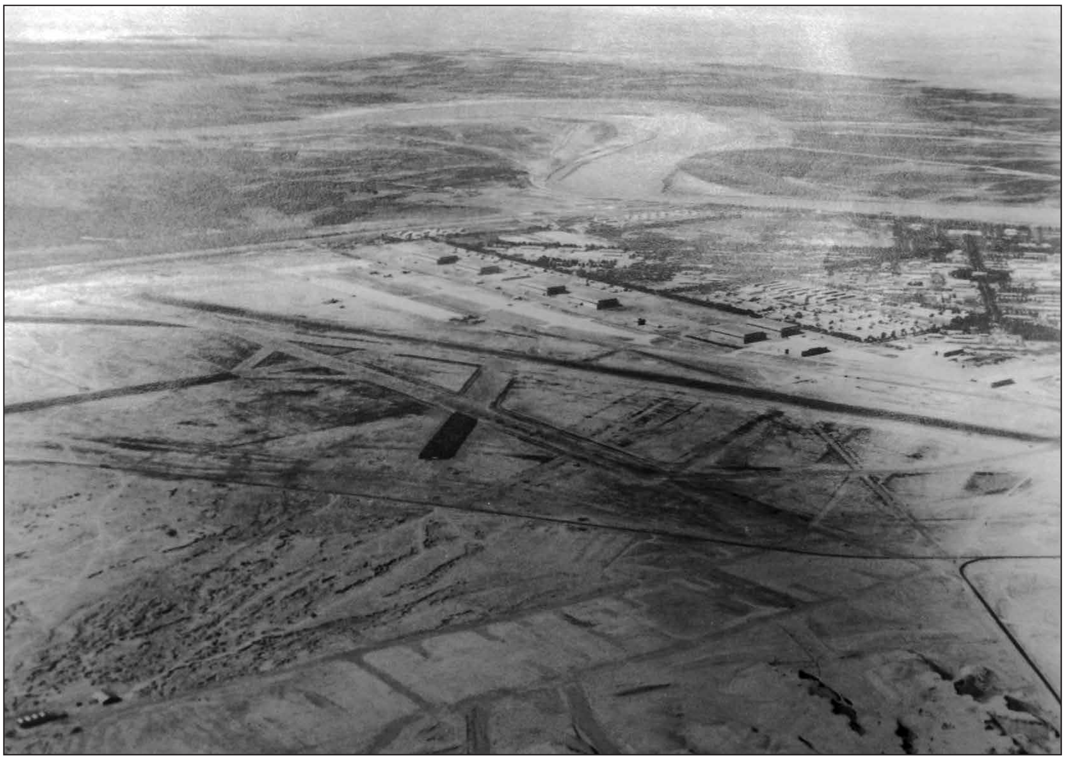
In contrast, a great difference was seen in the Electrical Section where a British NCO had been made available. Even so: 'The standard of the electricians is very low and steps are being taken to select them from the top of an entry to the Apprentice School instead of the bottom'. The Instrument Section was meanwhile in a particularly bad way because its building had been utterly destroyed during the Anglo-Iraq War. As a result, it had virtually ceased to exist though some work was being done by the Electrical Instructor. The fact that no instrument in any aircraft could be considered totally serviceable meant that another British NCO was urgently needed. Furthermore, many instruments had also been damaged when the Diyala river flooded Mu'askar al-Rashid aerodrome. The damaged instruments were now beyond repair because they were not properly dried out and oiled after the flood.

Where overall maintenance was concerned, Flight Lieutenant Caesar was again highly critical and gave the example of one particular aeroplane:

> A Gladiator damaged one wing and while it was being changed the British NCO inspected the rest of the aircraft. A patch on top [of the] main plane was removed and underneath was found a bullet hole in the rear main spar which was well past any repair limits. This [damage] had been done in May 1941 and the aircraft had done about 150 hours flying since. The other case was on the same aircraft where it was found that the inner anti-drag bracing wire lug on the top starboard mainplane had broken. The repair carried out was to fix the wire to the fitting with 18 SWG soft iron locking wire. On investigation it was found that the Senior Rigger



Photographs of what remained of the RIrAF after the Anglo-Iraqi War of May 1941 are extremely rare. In this example, a Hawker Iraqi Audax with its larger serial number (57) on the rear fuselage was certainly taken during the Second World War and the machine may well be a survivor of the British invasion of Iraq. Also note the elongated triangle or pennant painted on the mid-fuselage as a squadron badge. (Albert Grandolini collection)



An aerial photograph of Habbaniya aerodrome taken by the RAF around 1942. A long curve of the broad river Euphrates lies not far to the north, beyond what is now the small Iraqi town of Habbaniya. There was, and still is, an Evangelical Church in the middle of the roundabout (rotary) in the left middle distance. (Author's collection)

> NCO knew all about it and had asked the ARS Sergeant to repair it without anyone knowing. Disciplinary action is being taken.

Caesar was almost but not quite, complimentary about the Photographic Section, writing: 'This section is quite efficiently run by Mulazim Awal Fathi Tawfiq. But very little training seems to be done in air photography'.

Where the Wireless Section was concerned:

> The Signals Officer Mulazim Awal Majid al-Bushri has suffered to the same extent as the Armament Officer as he is without a British NCO, although he does get some help from the Electrical Instructor. Wireless is very little used and most sets were unserviceable until a few weeks ago owing to the shortage of HT Batteries due to the stock held being damaged by [Diyala river] flood.

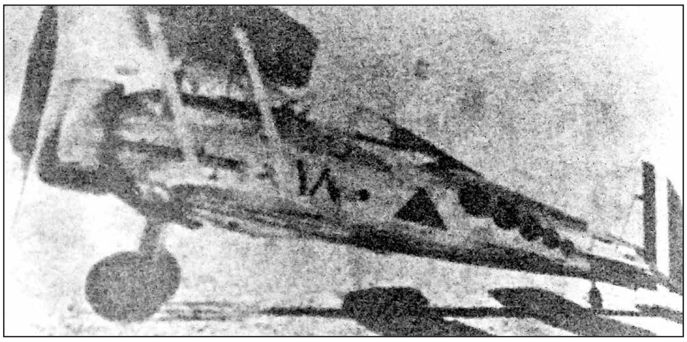
Then there was the matter of discipline, which was improving although far from being up to RAF standards:

> The standard of flying discipline has not changed since the last report and no bad cases of breaches of flying discipline have been reported. The general discipline has been good and the commanding officer is trying hard to raise the standard. There is still a great shortage of trained tradesmen and some of the supposed tradesmen are only fit to clean aircraft … the men lose all interest and are given no chance to learn.

As flying was only allowed on Wednesdays and Saturdays, very little training was carried out other than some short cross-country flights, circuits and landings. Furthermore, the British Advisor believed that the training syllabus needed drastic revision as none of the RIrAF's squadrons could be regarded as operational.

A small-scale exercise was undertaken between 27 and 29 November 1942 in cooperation with the British but otherwise the only action by the RIrAF was to 'show the flag' over the Khai Khadha area between Kut and Diwaniya. On 29 September 1942, four Nisrs of No. 1 Squadron based at Kut, flew over a 'rebel' Arab tribe that was besieging an isolated Iraqi Police position but did not open fire or drop bombs; this being repeated by four Nisrs the following day.

In July, Nuri al-Sa'id the Iraqi Prime Minister, was flown to Lydda in Palestine in an unspecified RIrAF aeroplane, being brought back from Cairo in August. On 17 December 1942, Prince Abd al-Ilah the Iraqi Regent, in company with the Iraqi Prime Minister, was flown to Egypt in a DH Rapide of No. 5 or 6 Squadron, being escorted by three Nisrs and returning without incident on 2 January 1943. Flight Lieutenant Caesar put as positive a gloss on the RIrAF as he could, claiming that 'Despite the hard work of the OC [Sami Abd al-Fattah], RIAF it is very far from being an operational Air Force but the Audax [Nisr] aircraft can deal with tribal trouble'.



Unfortunately some of the most interesting photographs of RIrAF aeroplanes during this period are only available in very poor quality. However, the Gloster Gladiator of No. 4 Squadron with serial number 180, seen here, bears a distinctive five discs motif, reportedly coloured red for Flight 1, blue for Flight 2 or green for Flight 3. Its serial number identifies it as one of examples delivered after 1942. (Ahmad Sadik collection)

Despite having been seconded to the RIrAF in order to assist the Iraqis rebuild their air force, Flight Lieutenant Caesar's Report No. 40 failed to convince everyone in the British Foreign Office. Attached inside the front cover of the folder containing his report was a note, without a name attached, which simply read: 'A pathetic story. It is a complete waste of money for the Iraqi Gov. to keep an Air Force … and it is a complete waste of RAF personnel for us to keep on the mission'. Fortunately, this seems to have been isolated outburst, as the British Mission continued, as did the Iraqi government's efforts to rebuild the Royal Iraqi Air Force.

Wing Cdr. C.W.M. Ling was recalled to the RAF, actually leaving Iraq on 1 November 1942, whilst his place at the head of the Advisory Mission would be taken by Wing Cdr. M.H. Rhys. Flight Lieutenant R.E. Caesar had similarly returned to RAF duty on the day that Ling left but had in practice, been loaned to the RIrAF as the acting Inspector or head of the mission until Rhys arrived. His previous position as the Technical Inspector went to Flight Lieutenant R.N.P. Riley who had arrived in Iraq on 22 October, although apparently being recalled to the RAF just over a month later on 24 November. There were no other changes in the Advisory Mission but the need for RAF NCOs to be seconded to assist the RIrAF, 'to carry out the same duties as a Squadron Engineer in the RAF' as the Mission Report put it, remained as acute as ever. Meanwhile an unnamed *Mulazim Thani Tayyar* had the delicate task of acting as the RIrAF liaison officer attached to the British Advisory Mission, a job which must have required considerable tact and even some diplomatic skill.

Advanced training remained difficult, with the three Gladiators handed over by the RAF in January 1942, being used in further training for three selected pilots. The idea was that having been trained themselves, these men would return to their squadron to train others. Nevertheless, there had been a significant increase in flying time across the RIrAF as a whole, up by 60 percent between March and August 1942. However, the Advisory Mission considered that much of this was more like joyriding than truly useful training.

3

THE REAF, GROUNDING AND REVIVAL (JUNE 1941 – 2 SEPTEMBER 1945)

On 6 April 1941, German and Italian forces invaded northern Greece (this being a second invasion where Italian troops were concerned). By the end of the month, they were in control of the Greek mainland, following the withdrawal of British and Allied forces. The situation in Iraq was growing potentially, just as serious. Following a coup in Iraq at the end of March, war broke out between Iraq and Britain – sometimes called the 'Rashid Ali Revolt' (see Chapter Eight) – and some excited younger Egyptian officers hoped that their country would also turn against the British 'occupiers'.

Major Nikolaus Ritter of the German Abwehr intelligence service with arm outstretched. The Hungarian aviator and desert explorer Count László Almásy has his back to the camera. Together they are briefing Luftwaffe pilots for their flight into Egypt, carrying the German secret agents Klein and Muehlenbruch. (Blume family archive)

However, General al-Masri warned them that the Iraqi Prime Minister, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani), would probably be betrayed and that his revolt would fail – as it eventually did. What is certain is that the General hoped in some way to ensure that Egypt emerged from any Axis victory in the Desert War with its independence intact – perhaps even enhanced. On the other hand, it would clearly be impossible for an Egyptian military revolt against the British to succeed. Egyptian forces were far too weak and British forces, even those currently in the country, were much too strong on the ground and in the air. Egypt still had no navy. Furthermore, it was not certain whether the majority of Egyptian troops would turn their weapons against the British as the would-be revolutionaries were still very much in a minority in Egyptian ranks.

Back in September 1940, Major Nikolaus Ritter of the German Abwehr, Military Secret Intelligence Service, had been in contact with the renowned Hungarian aviator and desert explorer, Count László Almásy (see Volumes 4 & 5). They decided that it might be worth the Abwehr contacting Aziz al-Masri in the hope that the nationalist (but currently retired), Egyptian General might be willing to assist the Axis cause. Ritter and Almásy drew up a plan to get General al-Masri out of Egypt and into Axis-dominated territory. Having managed to convince Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the Abwehr chief, to accept this proposal, Ritter and Almásy persuaded the new Hungarian ambassador to Egypt (Hungary being neutral until 27 June 1941) to agree to his embassy being used as a wireless communications hub for the enterprise. On 20 January 1941, Major Ritter, having been seconded to the *X Fliegerkorps Afrika, was placed in* command of *the Sonderkommando Ritter* (Special Command Ritter) as part of the *Aufklarungskommando Nordost Afrika*. The next step was to make radio contact with General Aziz al-Masri

قائد الطول بمروى حسن عبد الوهاب
١٩٣٩ - ١٩٤٠

Liwa (Brigadier) Abd al-Wahab, a senior Egyptian Army officer took over as Director of the REAF in 1939. He tried hard to be accepted by the Air Force, and was allowed the rank of *Qa'id Ustul Jawwi*, Air Vice Marshal. In fact, his passionate support for the Egyptian Air Force may have added to Abd al-Wahab's difficulties with a new Army Chief of Staff, resulting in his resignation late in 1940. (Author's collection)

Liwa Ali Muwafi Pasha served as Director of the REAF from late in 1940 until 1942. He then insisted on taking responsibility for the crisis in the Egyptian Air Force and so resigned. (Author's collection)

and his group of younger officer supporters via the Hungarian Embassy in Cairo.

One way or another, General al-Masri found himself presented with three plans. The first envisaged the Egyptian General's party being picked up by a German submarine in Lake Burullus on the northern edge of the Nile Delta but this proved impractical because the lake was too shallow for a submarine to submerge. The second plan would have involved a German aeroplane landing at a desert airstrip close to the hamlet of al-Khatatbah on the edge of the Nile Delta 55 kilometres north-west of Cairo. In fact, two Heinkel He.111 bombers and their crews were released from the Luftwaffe's 10 Air Corps for this purpose.

A problem then arose when the Egyptian government, urged by the British, withdrew the Hungarian Embassy's privilege of using coded wireless messages to and from the Hungarian capital. Ritter's network therefore established an alternative radio link via a wireless set reportedly located in the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Theresa in the Cairo suburb of Shubra. In fact, it is now thought that the replacement radio link was actually established via the sympathetic Japanese embassies in Cairo and Turkey.

Remarkable research by military historian Saul Kelly has unearthed details of Major Ritter's first attempt to extract General Aziz al-Masri from an agreed desert location north-west of Cairo, using two He.111 reconnaissance bombers on 7 June 1941. To quote from Ritter's own account, translated by Saul Kelly:

> They flew at first at low altitude further into the desert to avoid enemy planes surveying the coastal positions, then went up to several thousand feet and then down again near the landing point to under-fly the enemy radar … Everything went according to schedule. They saw the Red Djebel and they expected to find the landing cross of the Pasha [Aziz al-Masri]. But there was no landing cross.

The Jabal Ahmar (Red Mountain) – as distinct from the Maqabir al-Jabal al-Ahmar 'cemeteries' or ancient Egyptian stone quarries – lies some 10km west of Cairo: much too close to have been a likely landing place for a German aeroplane. The name Jabal Ahmar is sometimes also given to the Jabal al-Ghijijah (197 m high) but even this is still less than 16km from central Cairo. To continue Ritter's written account:

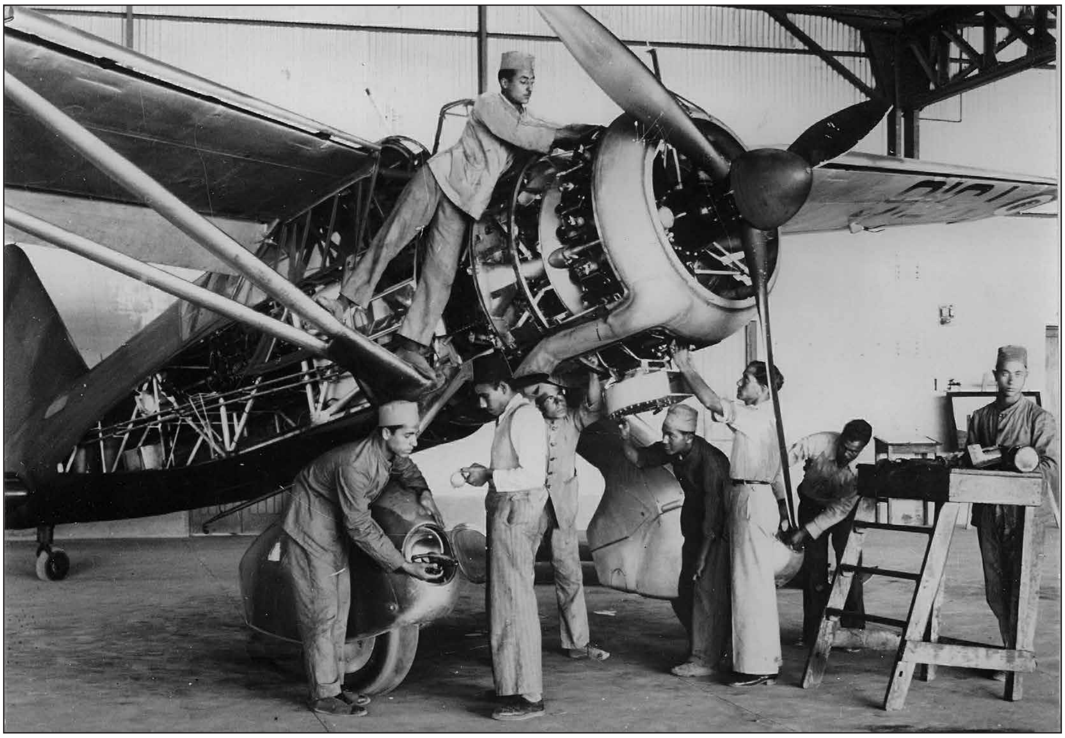
> Their disappointment was great … What could they do? They checked on their fuel and found that they had enough to cruise for about half an hour and still make it back. They turned around the Djebel, hoping that the Pasha might be somewhere near and just had not laid out the cross, because of some danger. There was nothing. They didn't think very long. In a daring rush they followed the trail towards Cairo – searching … But after their time was up and nothing in sight, they reluctantly turned around and with heavy hearts started their flight back. The pilots were angry and were sure the Pasha had left them in the lurch. But Almasy knew his man. He was sure that something serious had happened. The Pasha would otherwise never let us down.

Meanwhile, according to Egyptian sources, General al-Masri, Anwar Sadat of the army and *Tayyar Thani* Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf of the REAF, had earlier made a reconnaissance of what they believed to be the agreed area and had found it swarming with British troops. Therefore, the location was changed and the German aeroplane would instead land on the 178 m high Jabal Ruzza plateau approximately 80k due west of Cairo. Here the terrain was largely flat, still uninhabited and far from any centre of population. This was also an area of the Western Desert approached via the Cairo to Fayyum road which was patrolled by the Egyptian rather than the British Army.

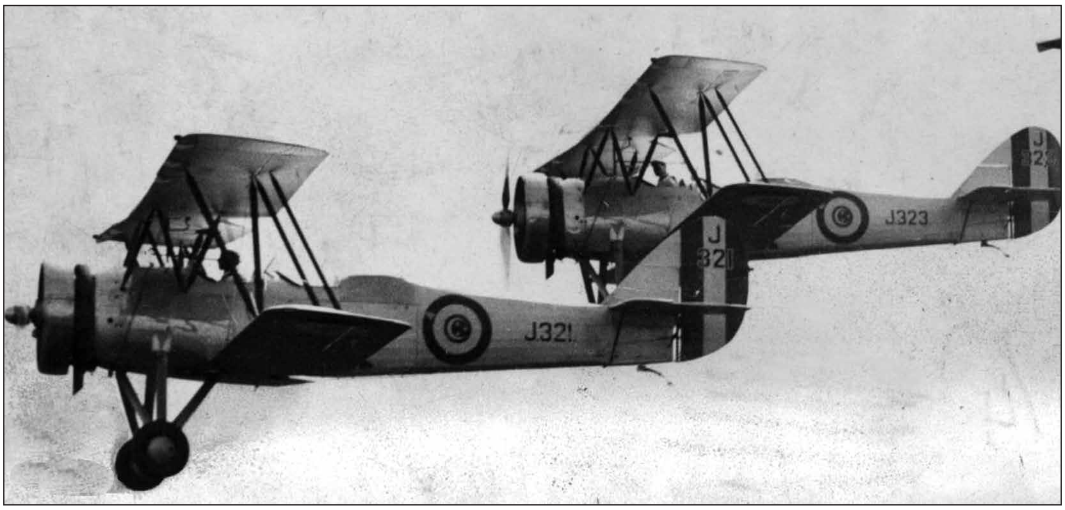
Some have also suggested that the location was already known to the enemy as a result of the German ambassador 'getting lost in the desert' while competing in a motor race from Cairo to Bahariya on 18 April 1936 (see Volume 5). According to one Egyptian source, the German aeroplane would be given British markings although this is not mentioned in the German sources.

Sadat later maintained that he himself had been responsible for getting hold of a suitable lorry to take the party to Jabal Ruzza but Egyptian Army Intelligence learned about the sale of a desert lorry and so the plan was changed with an ordinary motorcar being used instead. This car then broke down, so General al-Masri and *Tayyar Thani* Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf failed to reach the rendezvous. The German aeroplane arrived, waited for a while then returned to its base. Might it be possible that there had been a misunderstanding between Ritter and al-Masri's followers or somewhere along the rather tenuous communications link between them?

Quite what happened next is again unclear but one of several accounts of al-Masri's later attempts to fly out of Egypt to Lebanon,



One of the REAF's Westland Lysander under maintenance, though the Egyptian personnel are clearly posing for the camera. The photograph was taken early in the Second World War, and it is interesting to note that the undersides of the wings still bear the serial number Y516 and were probably still silver doped, whereas the rest of the aircraft has been given a new camouflage scheme. (EAF Museum collection)



Two REAF Avro 626 (serial numbers J321 and J323) before their tailskids were replaced by tailwheels. (Albert Grandolini collection)

includes an incorrect element which probably related to this first attempt to leave the country. It suggested that al-Masri and Abd al-Ra'uf headed south, either after getting their car going again or being given a lift by an Egyptian Army convoy whose officer claimed not to have recognised the General. Given General al-Masri's high prominence in the Army and in the Egyptian media at that time, this non-recognition seems unlikely. In any event, they made their way to Fayyum which was garrisoned by Egyptian troops, then returned to Cairo from the south.

Anti-British sentiment was also clear in the REAF Royal Flight. Here, Fred Weston had to wait three weeks for the correct papers to arrive before he could start work. He was then urgently summoned to the CO's office by an Egyptian NCO. The Commanding Officer of the Royal Flight, Ibrahim Hakki, was keen for his cooperation because the Royal Palace had demanded that both of the Royal Percival Q.6s be ready to fly to Luxor early the following morning. They were to collect King Faruq, his family and entourage. These machines were the most modern in the Royal Flight, having luxurious cabins and De Havilland Gypsy VI engines with variable pitch propellers. But only one was currently serviceable while the other was suffering severe vibration.

Hakki was afraid of the King's short temper and his reputation for ruthlessness with subordinates. Fortunately, Weston found that the vibration was due to an incorrect setting of the variable propellors. This was easy for the British Advisor to solve because he had himself been taught at the De Havilland factory in England. Ibrahim Hakki then insisted that Weston accompany him on a test flight. Although this was strictly against the rules of the British Advisory Mission, Weston realised that it was essential for him to develop a working relationship with the CO of the Royal Flight. Following a successful test, Ibrahim Hakki very unusually, congratulated Weston in the presence of the entire squadron.

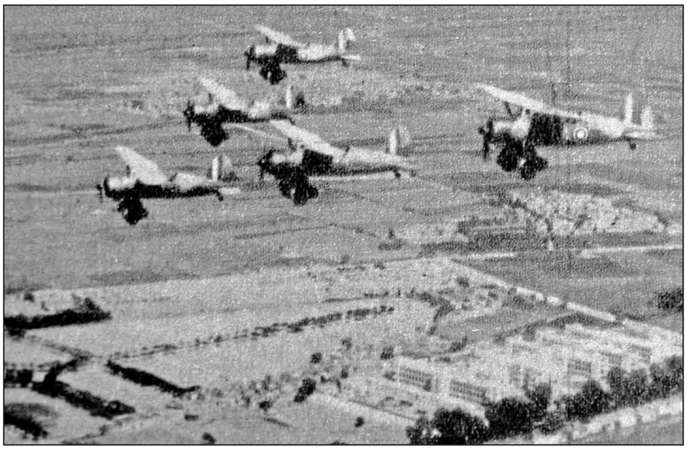
Hakki himself, was a keen bridge player and many years later after leaving Egypt in the wake of the 1952 Revolution, he would settle on the south coast of England where he became well-known for his skill at bridge. When the author told Fred Weston of this, the ex-Military Mission Advisor was surprised, recalling that while Hakki had been a bridge champion in Egypt, he had also made no attempt to hide his hatred of the 'British colonial regime'. Nor did he hide the fact that he regarded Weston as part of this oppressive system. Fred Weston in turn considered the King's Flight to be the centre of anti-British sentiment and of 'plotting' in the REAF.

A few hundred metres from the hangers and offices of the Royal Flight were those of the REAF's Flying Training school which were still used by Technical Schools. These were still accepting new cadres of students each year, despite the fact that the FTS aeroplanes at Khanqah were getting tired and worn. In April 1941, the FTS could muster 36 Magisters for a Primary Training Flight, 17 Avro 626s for an Intermediate Training Flight and just five operational Harts for an Advanced Training Flight. Furthermore, the Harts could still not be used in high summer because they lacked sufficient tropical modification. Fortunately, most advanced flying training was done in autumn.

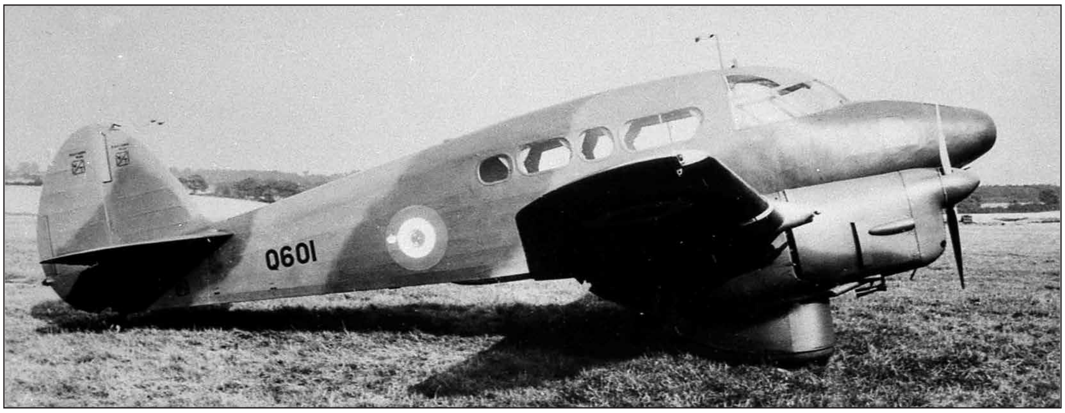
Meanwhile, the Allies continued to achieve success against the Italians in the Western Desert, with the southern Libyan complex of oases at Kufra falling to Free French forces by the end of March 1941. Small numbers of German forces had started to arrive to support the Italians in February, accompanied by steadily increasing numbers of German air units. It is possible that the presence of the Luftwaffe in Libya, followed by the German and Italian overrunning of Greece in April, prompted another exchange of positions by Nos. 2 and 5 (Fighter) Squadrons of the REAF around 11 April. On this occasion, the more experienced No. 2 Squadron moved back to Almaza from Suez to protect the Egyptian capital. In fact, the German II. Gruppe was soon operating from Rhodes, laying mines in the waters around Alexandria and in the Suez Canal. The threat from the Luftwaffe then increased following the German conquest of Crete and the evacuation of British forces from the island by the start of June 1941.

King Faruq reviewing Egyptian Army troops, apparently during the early part of the Second World War. The vehicles in the background suggest that this was a motorised unit, perhaps part of the elite Mobile Force under Prince Isma’il Da’ud which would defend the Egyptian capitals’ south-western approaches. (Author’s collection)

No. 2 Squadron now included some of the most politically active junior officers in the REAF, along with Hassan Izzat who was still the supplies officer for both fighter squadrons. Izzat and Baghdadi claim that their initial group of five men were the origins of what became the Free Officers Movement, eventually led by Colonel Gamal Abd al-Nasser (President Nasser as he became). Baghdadi was given primary responsibility for recruiting new members, especially in the REAF and to establish contacts with other political groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as with supporters of General al-Masri. The latter were already understood to have established links with German secret agents.

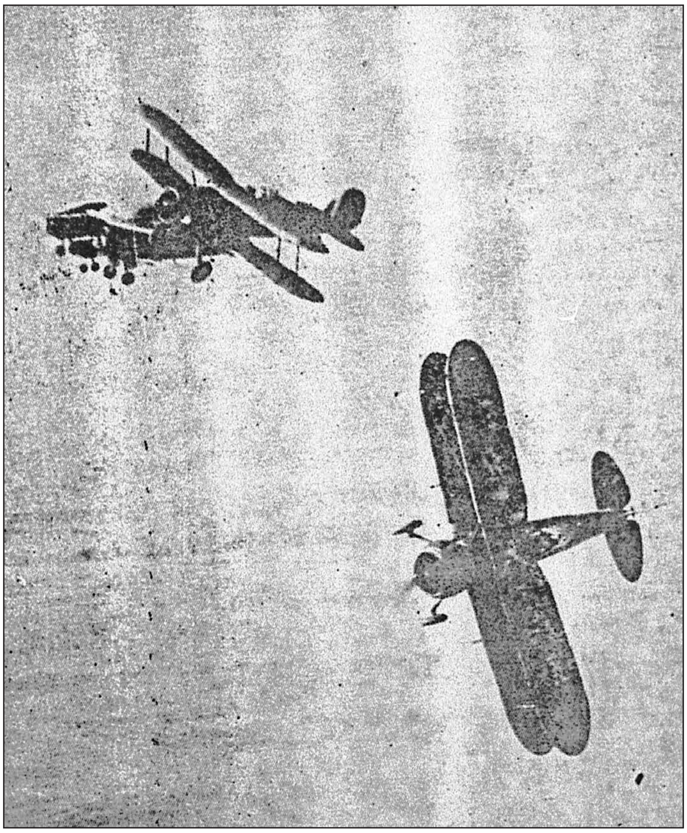

A formation of five REAF Westland Lysanders over the irrigated and intensively cultivated Nile Delta around 1941 or 1942. Unlike in some earlier photographs of Egyptian Lysanders, these machines now have large national insignia markings on their tails, though only three of them appear to wear fuselage roundels outlined in yellow and perhaps with central green disc replaced by a larger green crescent and stars. (EAF Museum collection)

According to Tewfik Aclimandos in his book, *Revisiting the History of the Egyptian Army*, the most significant of the ‘loose constellation of young officers gravitating around’ General al-Masri were Wajih Khalil (died in 1948 during the Palestine War), Anwar Sadat and Abd al-Mun’im Abd al-Ra’uf. The latter, although an officer in the REAF, did not belong to Baghdadi’s organisation. Making such contacts also became easier once No. 2 Squadron was back at Almaza aerodrome where several other squadrons also had their headquarters, No. 2 Squadron having again exchanged places with No. 5 Squadron early in April.



One of the REAF Royal Flight’s Percival Q6s (Q602) photographed in England. This was probably before its delivery or during a visit to the UK after the war. (Author’s collection)

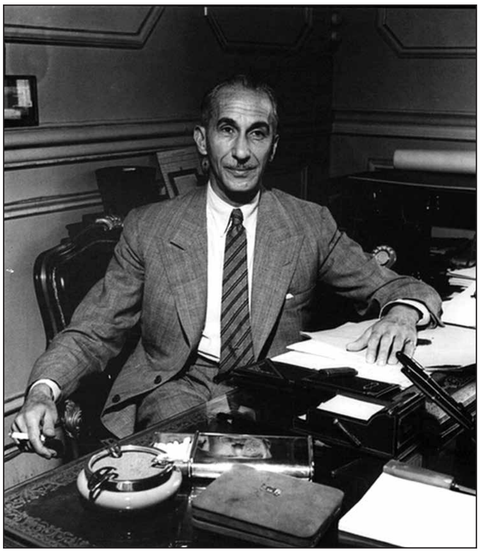
At least one of Misr Air's De Havilland DH 84 Expresses had a large Egyptian flag painted on the sides of its fuselage to emphasize its Egyptian identity and official neutrality. Here King Faruq is also seen with a young aide-de-camp. (Author's collection)



A formation of REAF Gloster Gladiators of No. 2 Squadron peeling into a dive during the early part of the Second World War. Despite negative comments by some later aviation historians, documents from the British Advisory Mission written at the time make it clear that Egyptian fighter pilots were eager to face Italian or German intruders. (EAF Museum collection)

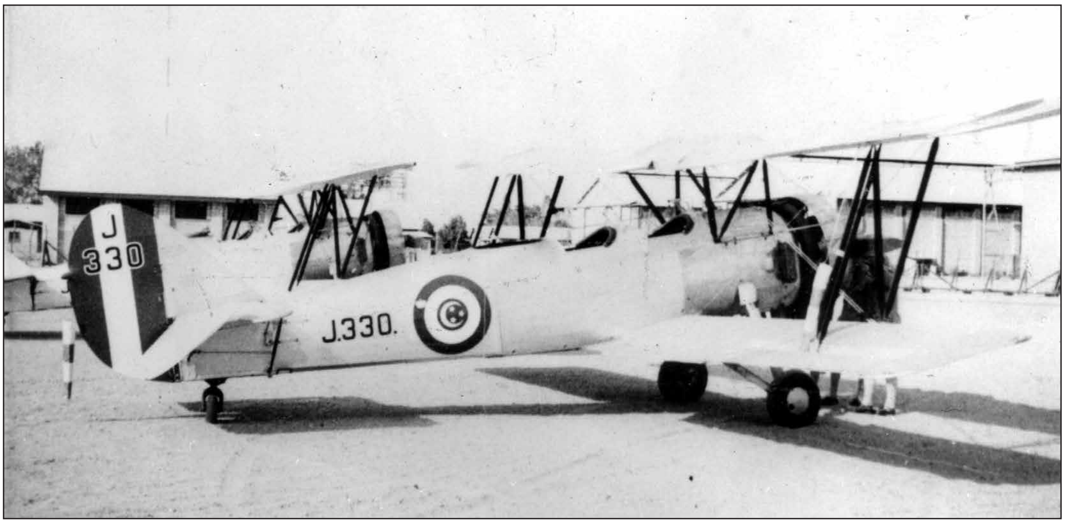
No. 5 Squadron quickly found itself busy, as is reflected in Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid's log-book. His first patrol, following the return to Suez, was in Gladiator L9031 on the 14th April (taking off at 1050). This was followed by two patrols on the 15th (at 1430 and 1620 or 1820, both in L9041), on the 19th (at 1030 in Gladiator N5755), twice on the 21st (at 0640 and 1150, both in L9031), twice on the 24th (at 0840 in L9041 and at 1120 in L9033) and on the 29th (at 0715 in L9031). However, no contacts with enemy aeroplanes were recorded.

The final pages of the log-book of another, unnamed REAF pilot who served during this period, has also been made public. The man in question may have been Abd al-Latif Baghdadi although this remains unconfirmed. He appears to have earned his wings in 1939 and to have concluded his flying career in December 1952. The aeroplanes which he had flown were then listed in the order in which he had first taken their controls. Thus, we are informed that during this period, he had totalled one hours 45 minutes as first pilot in a DH Moth; 82 hours 45 minutes 'dual' in a Miles Magister and 86 hours 55 minutes as first pilot; 10 hours 20 minutes 'dual' in an Audax and 18 hours 45 minutes as first pilot; 20 hours 'dual' in an Avro 626 and thirty-one hours 45 minutes as first pilot, plus 45 minutes 'dual' at night and 15 minutes as first pilot at night; one hour

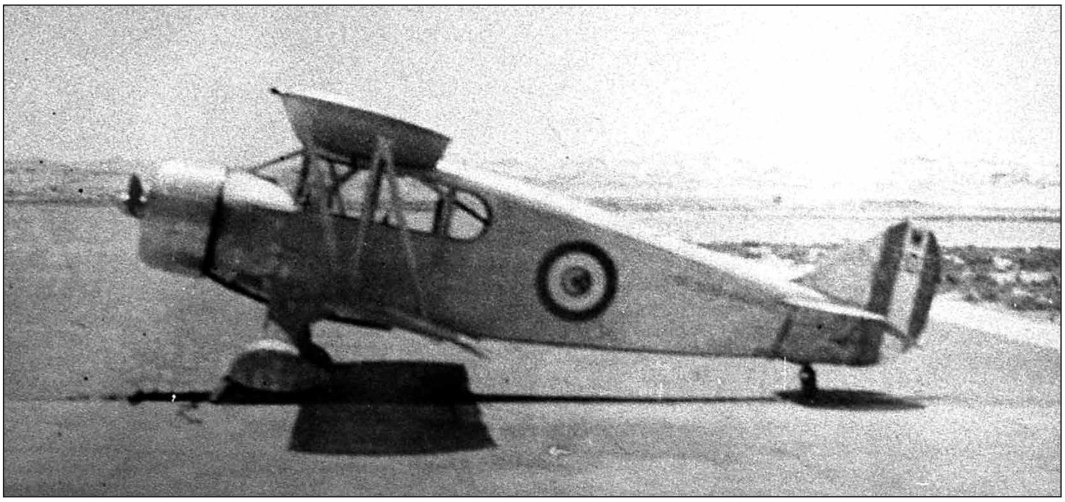


As a younger man. Ahmad Hasanain Pasha had unsuccessfully attempted to be the first Egyptian to fly from England to Egypt. During the Second World War he remained a firm friend of the United Kingdom and was regarded as a calming influence within the volatile politics of King Faruq's palace. (Author's collection)

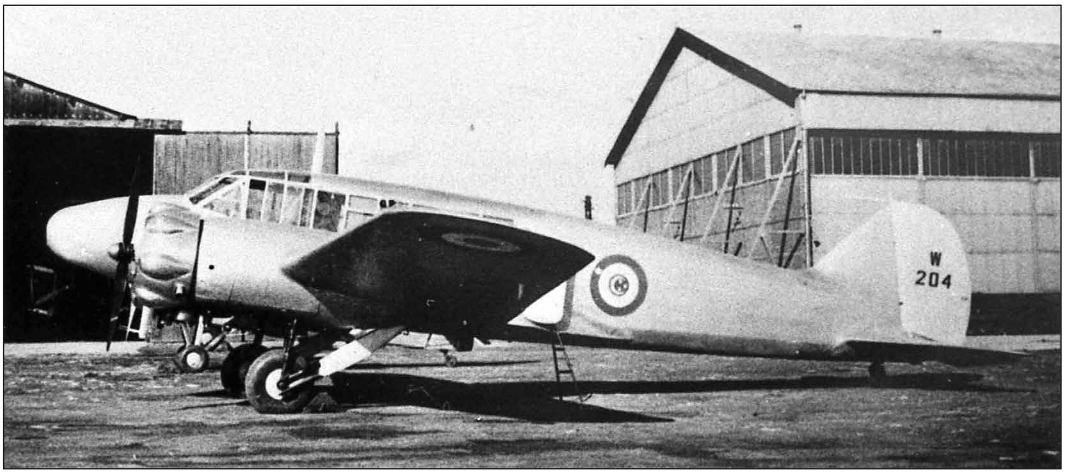
The Gloster Gladiators of No.2 squadron, based at Suez, over the Suez Canal. This photograph appears to show the entire the entire squadron and was clearly taken for publicity purposes. (EAF Museum collection)



Two of the REAF's later production Avro 626s (including number J330) at Almaza during the Second World War. The Egyptians still had sixteen or seventeen of this type on strength, mostly forming part of the FTS's Intermediate Training Flight. (EAF Museum collection)



Around this time, the REAF's single Avro 641 Commodore became unserviceable because the Egyptians no longer had spare parts for its Armstrong Siddeley Lynx IVC engine. Ibrahim Gazerine would therefore replace the original engine with a more powerful Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah IX of similar weight, taken from an unserviceable Avro Anson. (EAF Museum collection)



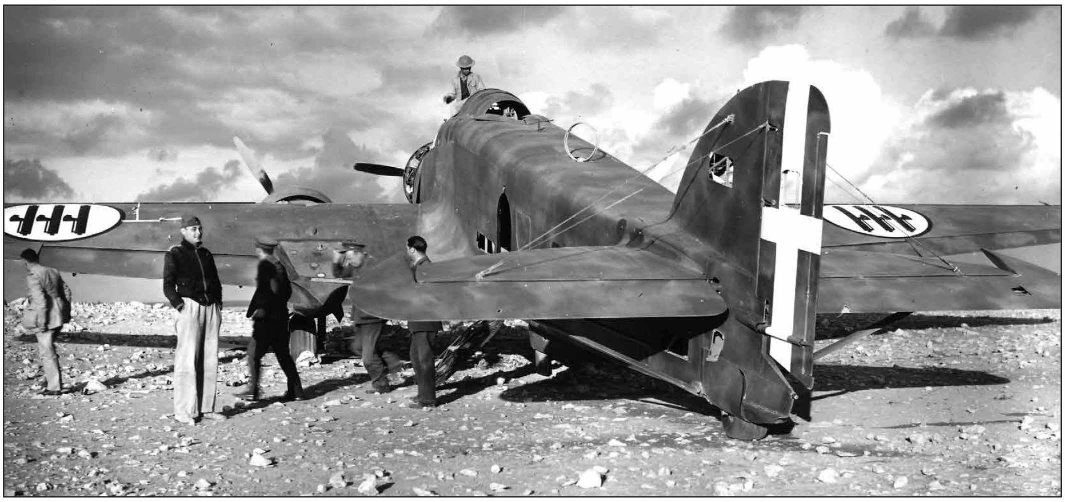
The REAF Royal Flight's Avro 652 (number W204) reportedly remained operational throughout the Second World War, despite heavy use by No. 3 Communications Squadron (EAF Museum collection)

'dual' in a Hawker Hart; with 50 hours 30 minutes as first (only) pilot in a Gloster Gladiator. He then moved to other types, which suggests that his time as a Gladiator fighter pilot was before the REAF was grounded in 1942 (see Volume Six).

British fortunes in the Desert War had now, once again, declined and the Egyptian Prime Minister asked General Archibald Wavell, then the British Commander-in-Chief Middle East, what he wanted the Egyptian Army to do. In reply, Wavell asked that the Egyptians simply continue what they were currently doing – namely to protect the Suez Canal, Nile Delta and Nile Bridges and that Egyptian forces in the Western Desert would defend themselves if attacked. This is what the Egyptian Army and the REAF did whilst Egyptian units further west withdrew just ahead of the British. They pulled back east of al-Alamain although those south of the Qattara Depression remained in place and continued their deep desert patrols. The British withdrawal, ahead of Rommel's German and Italian forces, necessitated the northern end of the vital air observation line being withdrawn to Burj al-Arab in May 1941.

On 13 May, Italian bomber crews first recorded meeting night fighters which were almost certainly British rather than Egyptian. Twelve days later, enemy pressure on the air defences of Egypt was such that No. 202 Group had to be reformed, giving it control of all air units in the Nile Delta along with responsibility for defending Cairo and the rest of the Egyptian heartland. The Group's Headquarters were now located in Cairo. The Gladiators of No. 5 Squadron REAF at Suez remained a deterrent to daylight raids in that area but posed little threat to fast, usually high-flying, solitary enemy reconnaissance machines and could do virtually nothing against night raiders.

For example, on the night of 7/8 May around 20 He.111s from the Luftwaffe's II./KG 26, flew over the Alexandria area from the west but did not attack; instead, they headed further east and laid mines in the Suez Canal. This raid necessitated RAF Wellingtons fitted with degaussing rings having to make more sweeps over the Canal to destroy magnetic mines. The Heinkels themselves had probably come from recently retaken Italian aerodromes in western Libya, however two were lost on this mission and two more crashed on their return to base.



This Savoia Marchetti SM.79 of the Regia Aeronautica appears to have made an emergency landing in the desert. According to some sources it had either been damaged by Egyptian anti-aircraft fire or had been located in the desert by Egyptian troops. (Ibrahim Gazerine collection)

The Egyptian Army was tasked with maintaining internal security in the Egyptian heartlands during the Second World War. This entailed much more than a formal changing of the guard at the Kasr al-Nil Bridge in central one of Cairo, as seen here. This historic structure dated from 1931 and had replaced the first bridge to span the Nile in the heart of the Egyptian capital. (Egyptian Military Museum collection)

In both of the latter aircraft, one member of their crew was killed. During the night of 24 May 1941, another substantial raid by around a dozen enemy aeroplanes, dropped nine bombs around and 14 mines into, the Suez Canal.

These events were hugely frustrating for the men of *Qa'id Sirb* Hassan Mahmud's No. 5 Squadron at Suez. Nevertheless, the Egyptian pilots continued to fly patrols which at least had the effect of reassuring those on the ground that someone was trying to protect them. Abu Zaid's log-book for May lists six such sorties, all in Gladiators: on the 3rd (at 1045 for 'air to ground firing' in L9033), on the 5th (at 0945 for 'dogfighting' in N5755), on the 11th (at 0955 for 'air to ground firing' in N5764 or more likely N5767), on the 15th (at 0955 for 'patrol' in L9041), twice on the 19th (at 0910 and again at 1350, both for 'patrol' and both in N5464 or more likely N5767).

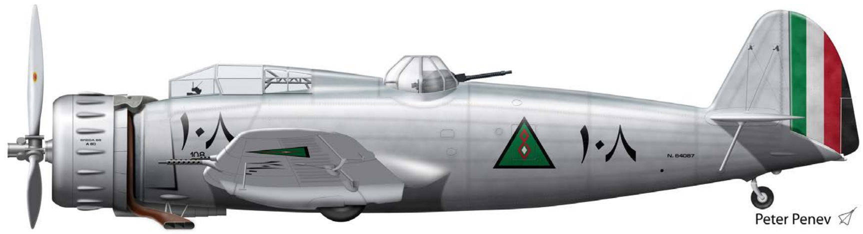
While Abu Zaid and his colleagues were vainly trying to defend Suez and the Canal from Axis air attack, a strange and still not fully understood, plot was being carried out at Almaza on the outskirts of Cairo. This again had General Aziz al-Masri at its centre and was intended to fly the nationalistic old officer out of Egypt. According to Egyptian sources, he intended to fly to Beirut which was still under the control of forces loyal to the legitimate – but increasingly collaborationist – French government based at Vichy in central France.

Other sources, both British and German, suggest that he was intending to go directly to German-held territory. A lot was written about this 'Al-Masri Scandal' in subsequent years, most of it coloured by the wisdom of hindsight, by patriotic self-justification on both sides and by claims that the plot had been more 'revolutionary' than it actually was. In at least one published British account, there was also a straightforward falsehood.

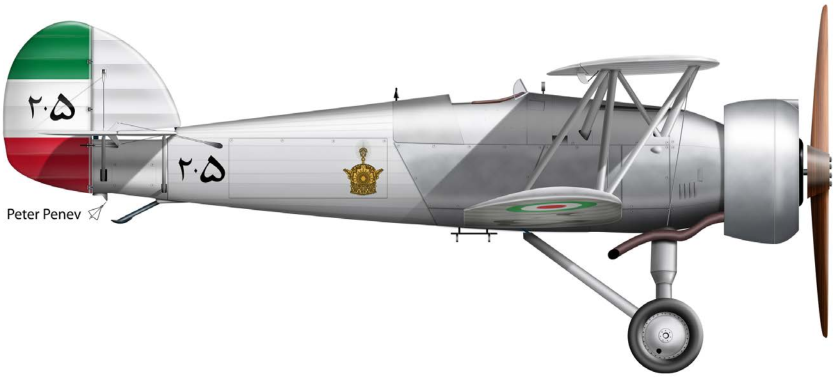
Since retiring as the Egyptian Chief of Staff, General al-Masri kept out of the limelight for almost two years – his attempted rendezvous with a German aeroplane at Jabal Ruzza not having become public knowledge. According to Anwar Sadat of the Egyptian Army Signals Corps and Abd al-Latif Baghdadi of No. 2 Squadron REAF, who were two of the organisers of this 'affair', the General intended to travel via Lebanon or Syria to Iraq. There he supposedly hoped to meet the new Iraqi Prime Minister, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani), whose supporters were currently fighting a brief and ultimately doomed war against the British (see Chapter Eight). This was almost certainly correct but al-Masri's deeper motives remain unknown and the role of British intelligence services in the entire episode, remains murky.

Abd al-Latif Baghdadi also seems to suggest that German agents in Lebanon had already arranged or had promised to arrange, passage through Lebanon and Syria to Iraq. Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf was to arrange for an Avro Anson to be available with himself as first pilot while Husayn Zulfiqar Sabri, currently attached to the Royal Flight, would be the second pilot. Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf also arranged for *Tayyar Thani* (Pilot Officer) Zulfiqar Sabri to be duty officer on the day of the flight.

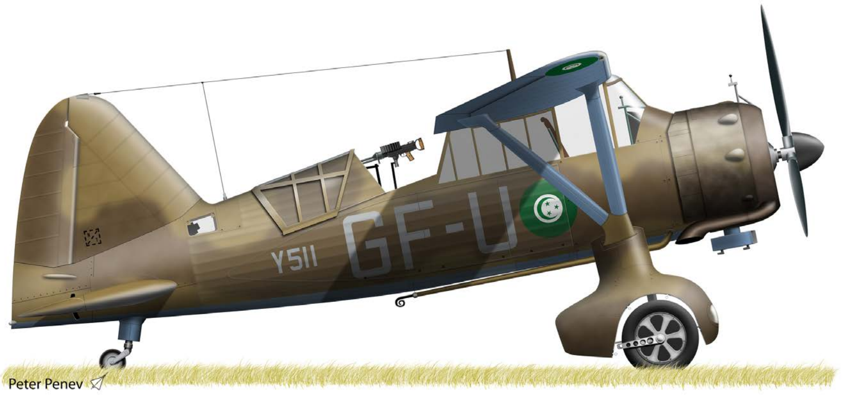
Most of those involved subsequently took great pride in their 'revolutionary and patriotic' plot although Zulfiqar seems never to



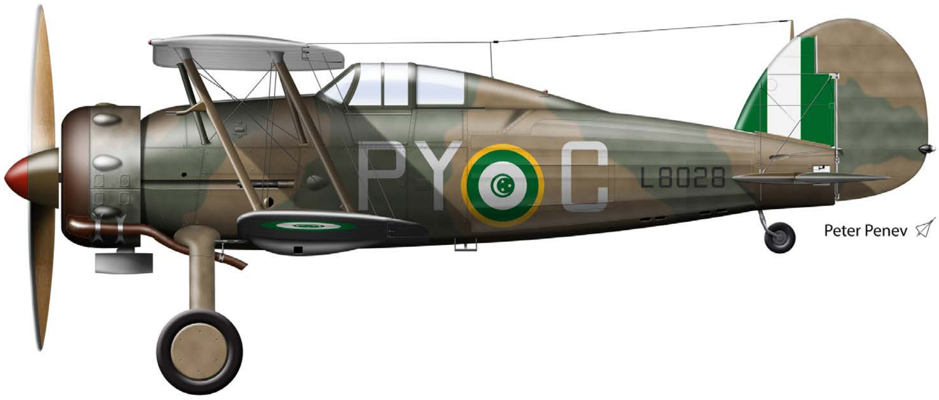
The Breda Ba 65 ground attack aircraft supplied to the Royal Iraqi Air Force were powered by eighteen-cylinder Fiat A 80 engines which necessitated a slightly different engine cowling to those Breda 65s built for the Italian Regia Aeronautica. On Iraqi machines, the 18 small, streamlined fairings or bulges on the cowling were equally spaced, were all of the same size and were all at the same distance from the front of the cowling. It also seems that the streamlined fairings around the tailwheels of Iraqi Bredas were removed after a relatively short time, perhaps because they made virtually no difference to the aeroplane's speed but tended to get clogged with dust, sand or mud. Like all RIrAF Breda 65 aircraft, this machine served with No. 5 Squadron and had a large serial number, in this case 108, in large Arabic numerals on the rear and front of the fuselage. It is repeated in small European numerals beneath the front number. The serial number was also painted beneath the wings in a manner copied from the British RAF. The construction number N° 64087 is meanwhile written in small lettering on the rear fuselage, behind the RIrAF national insignia and the aircraft type is written in similarly small lettering on the sides of the engine cowling. Note that the gunner's turret has only one machine gun, which is offset to one side. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



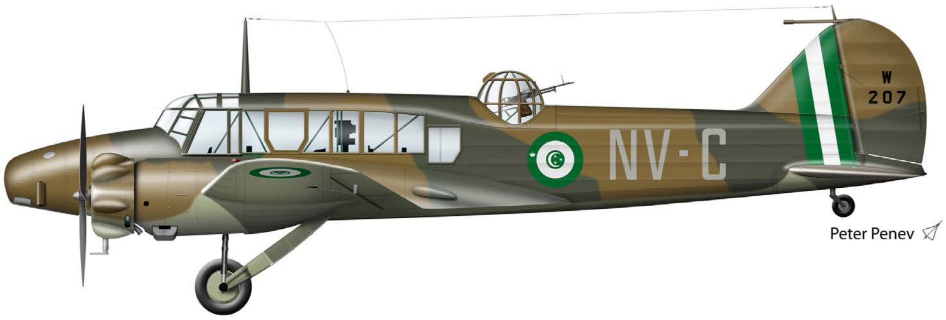
The Hawker Persian Fury was a special version built for the Imperial Iranian Air Force. These machines were used by no less than five Iranian flying units: Nos. 1, 2 and 3 of the 1st Air Regiment based outside Tehran, by No. 1 Squadron of the 2nd Air Regiment based at Tabriz and by the 3rd Air Regiment at Mashad. The first 16 Hawker Persian Furies purchased by Iran, including number 205 shown here, were initially powered by Pratt & Whitney Hornet S2B1g radial engines, with a three-bladed propeller. However, this did not prove very satisfactory so the next six purchased had Bristol Mercury VI SP radial engines with a two-bladed propeller. Photographs of Persian Furies taken in Iran indicate that most or perhaps all surviving Persian Furies were subsequently given Mercury engines and two-bladed propellers. Hawker Persian Fury number 205 appears here in the normal Iranian national markings of the time, with an Imperial Crown motif on the fuselage. It is also interesting to note that the serial numbers of Iranian aeroplanes used the Persian variant of the Arabic numbering system which differed in a number of respects. They are applied to the rear fuselage, rudder and beneath the lower wings where they read from the rear on the right and from the front on the left wing, as in the British RAF. However, the number is not repeated on the upper wings. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



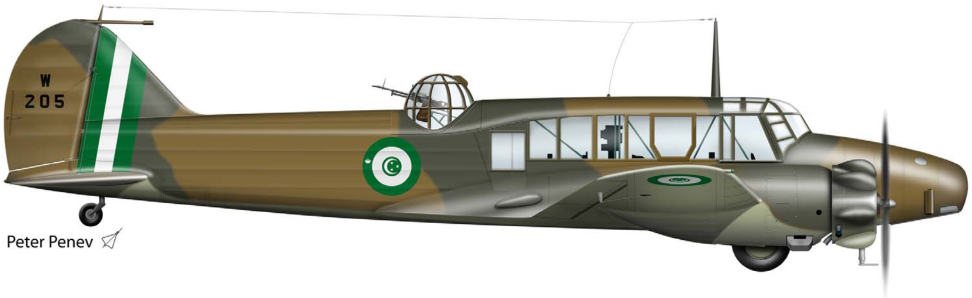
REAF Lysanders operated by No. 1 Squadron appeared not only in a number of different paint schemes at different times during the Second World War but also wore two different versions of REAF national markings. Though not all Egyptian Lysanders had all of these variations, the different paint schemes themselves appear to have evolved as follows: 1 – An overall silver dope (see Volume 5); 2 – Temperate European RAF style brown and dark green upper and side surfaces but still with silver doped under surfaces (see Volume 5); 3 – Temperate European brown and dark green upper and side surfaces with sky blue under surfaces; 4 – A locally applied 'sand and stone' upper and side surfaces with azure blue under surfaces. The fourth version, which is seen here on REAF Lysander number Y511, probably used paint from RAF stores but was sprayed by REAF technicians, resulting in very blurred divisions between the two upper colours. On these Egyptian aircraft the emphasis of the camouflage pattern also seems to have been more horizontal, tending to run fore and aft in contrast to the pattern on RAF aircraft in which the camouflage shapes tended to go around the machine. The fourth colour scheme may also still have been used by surviving REAF Lysanders during the Palestine War of 1948. On Lysander number Y511, the very large green and white tail stripes have been removed while the aeroplane also has a new form of REAF roundels (apparently only used on some REAF Lysanders) with a green crescent and stars on a white disc within a green circle. The fuselage roundels no longer have the high visibility outer yellow rings used in the previous third colour scheme. Meanwhile, the serial number Y511 is in mid-grey on the rear fuselage with the individual code GF-U in large mid-grey letters beneath the cockpit. These were added to REAF aircraft that were working in close association with the British RAF. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



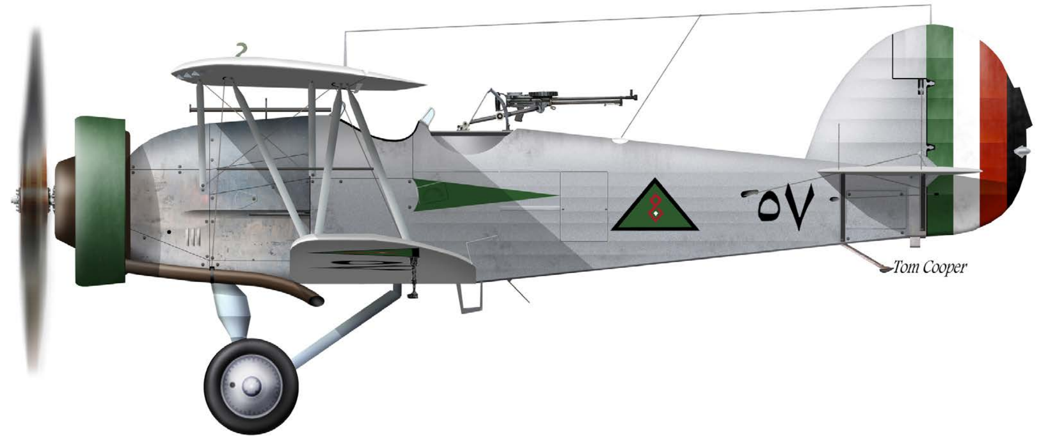
Gloster Gladiator biplane fighters of the REAF's No. 2 Squadron, which alternated between the daytime defence of Suez and that of Cairo, were also given RAF style individual code letters. In this case serial number L8028 has the letters PY-C. Unlike the Gladiators of No. 5 Squadron and the Lysanders of No. 1 Squadron, there is no evidence that the original RAF Temperate European brown and dark green camouflage scheme of No. 2 Squadron's machines was changed in Egyptian service, at least not for several years. As these Gladiators had originally been built for the RAF, the underneath of most of lower right wing, all of the upper right and upper left wings, the right tailplane and right elevator, are painted pale blue. The underneath of the lower left wing, the lower part of the fuselage, the left tailplane and elevator and the innermost part of right lower wing are painted black. This machine has large striped, green, white and green national markings on its tail-fin while the roundels on the sides of the fuselage have high visibility yellow outer rings. While the serial number L8028 is in black on the rear fuselage, the RAF style code lettering PY-C is in large grey lettering on the fuselage on either side of the roundel. The red-painted front of the propeller spinner almost certainly indicates the Squadron Flight to which it belongs. Note that this Gladiator had a large oil filter cooler beneath the engine cowling. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



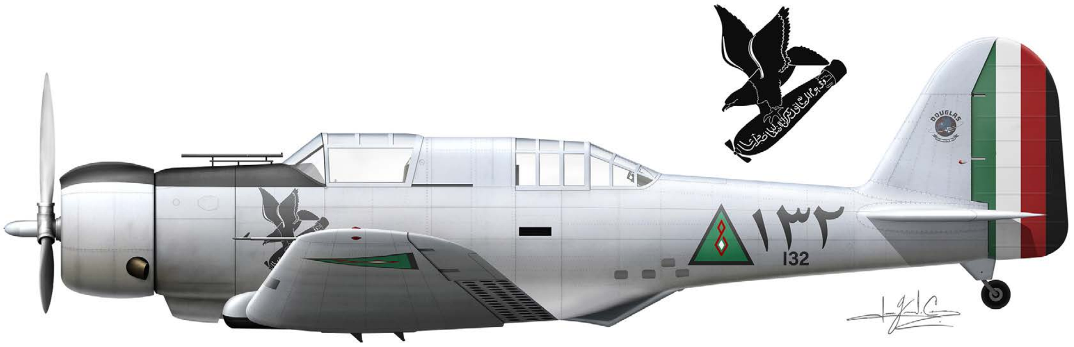
The REAF's Avro Anson Mk. 1s were supplied to the No. 3 Squadron, REAF in a normal 1939 style RAF day bomber colour scheme, which was the Temperate European brown and dark green upper surface camouflage, probably with Sky Type S (pale blue-green) underneath. This machine has standard REAF national markings, so that the roundels do not have the high visibility outer yellow ring. It is also interesting to note that the fuselage roundel still has a white crown in the outer green ring; a form which would be discontinued during the Second World War for all REAF aircraft except those of the Royal Flight. On Egyptian Ansons, at this stage, the green and white national markings stripes on the tail are tilted at an angle, following the line of the hinged rudder. The stripes also extend down as far as the place where the tailplane meets the fuselage. The individual code letters NV-C, added because the Ansons of No. 3 Squadron were working closely with the British RAF, are in light grey between the fuselage roundel and the serial number. The unit code letters NV (the C being the individual aircraft identification) were subsequently used by No. 79 Squadron RAAF from 1943 to 1945, strongly suggesting that the allocation of RAF unit code letters to some REAF squadrons ceased in 1942 when the Egyptian Air Force was for a while grounded. The serial number of this particular Anson is unfortunately invisible in the only available photograph but was either W206 or W207. However, W206 was probably destroyed late in 1940, so here W207 has been chosen. The upper gun turret is of the early rounded type with just one gun and the aeroplane has only one tall radio aerial on top of the cockpit. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



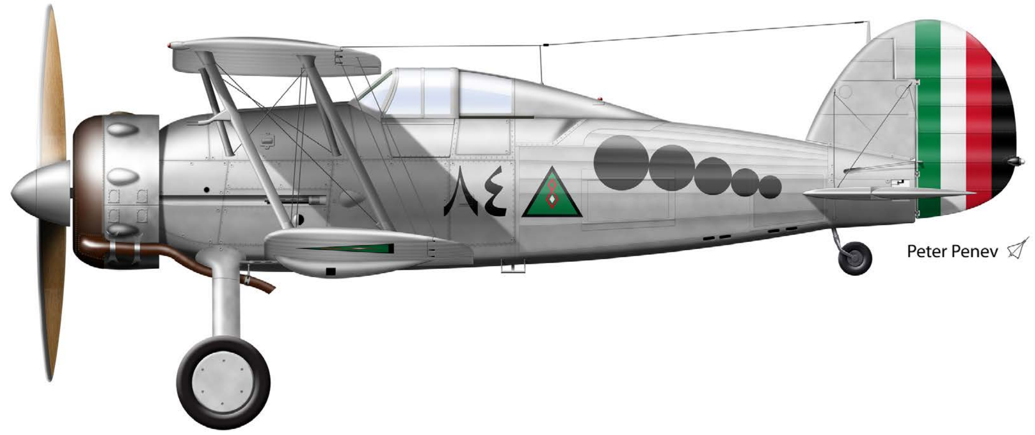
This REAF Avro Anson MK. I, serial number W205, is also from No. 3 Squadron of the REAF but lacks the RAF style unit code lettering. This was probably because it had not been involved in anti-submarine patrols over the Gulf of Suez but instead remained at Almaza outside Cairo for communications work. It was this Anson in which General Aziz al-Masri and his two REAF colleagues attempted to travel from Egypt to Lebanon in the early hours of Friday 16 May 1941; an unauthorised flight which caused the first of those scandals which rocked the REAF in 1941 and 1942. The aeroplane has the same RAF style day bomber colour scheme with Temperate European brown and dark green upper and side surfaces, with a Sky Type S (pale blue-green) lower surfaces. The style and location of Egyptian national markings are also the same and the serial number is again written in black on the rudder. It is worth noting that the serial number was repeated in small white letters on the propellers, with the additional letter L or R for left or right. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



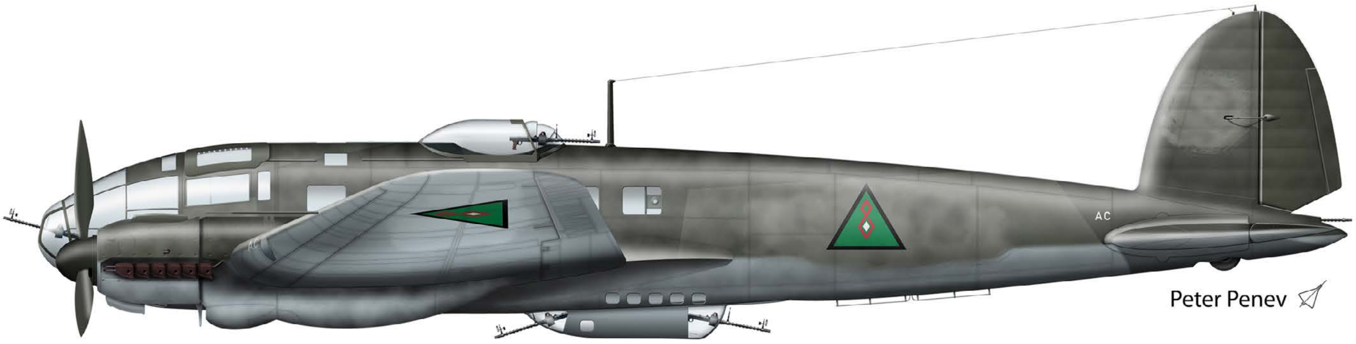
This Hawker Nisr Iraqi Audax from No. 3 Squadron, RIrAF, belonged to the second delivery of this type to Iraq, which were given serial numbers 47 to 68. It also has the long green triangular pennon-insignia which is believed to have been that of the RIrAF's No. 3 Squadron Otherwise, the Hawker Nisr is overall silver aluminium dope, with the bare metal areas of front fuselage panel shinier than the doped fabric. Engine cowling appeared to have had a darker finish, either in dark metal or dark green but was no longer painted black, as was the case on Iraq's first delivery of Nisrs. The serial number 57 is painted in large Arabic numerals on the rear fuselage and the aeroplane clearly has broader and softer, 'desert' tyres. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



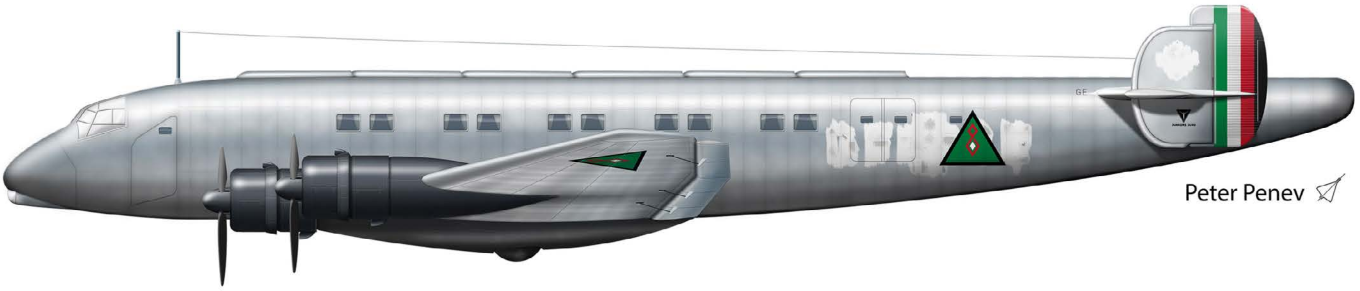
Also known as the Douglas A-17A, the Northrop-Douglas Model 8A-4 was the version built for Iraq. It was powered by a Wright Cyclone 1,000 hp (746 kW) GR-1820-G103 engine but was unarmed at the time of its delivery to the Middle East. These machines retained their overall bare metal finish, except for a black anti-dazzle panel in front of the cockpit and over the tops of the engine cowlings. The motif showing a bomb being carried by an eagle was adopted by newly formed No. 7 Squadron RIrAF and continued to be used, although with occasional variations, at least until 1975. The Douglas Company is similarly prominently displayed on this aircraft's tail. However, RIrAF Northrop-Douglas 8A-4 dive-bombers only acquired their bomb-racks after arriving in Iraq and it remains unclear how many – if any – were given guns before the Anglo-Iraq War of May 1941. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)



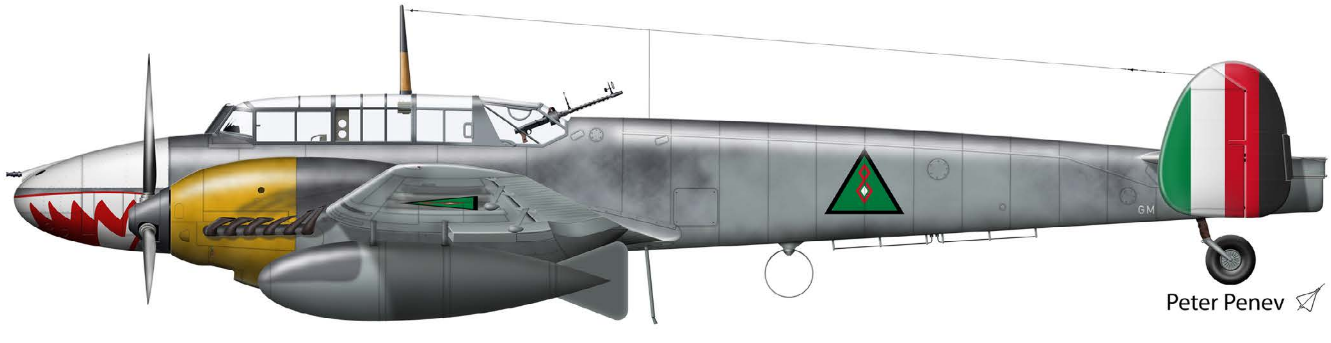
There is uncertainty about the colouring of the row of linked discs or balls along the fuselages of Gladiators of No. 5 Squadron, RIrAF. According to some sources, they were always black; according to others they were black, red or green according to the Flight that the aircraft belonged to. Otherwise, these machines were an overall silver dope and bare metal, except for the front part of the engine cowling which has a brazed or bronzed finish. The spinner on the propeller of this particular Gladiator appears to be unpainted metal, while the propeller itself was two-bladed for this mark of Gladiator. It is also interesting to note that Iraqi Gladiators did not have the large oil filter cooler beneath the engine cowling seen on most Egyptian Gladiators. Otherwise, this No. 5 Squadron aeroplane has normal RIrAF national markings and a large black Arabic serial number in front of the triangular fuselage national insignia. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



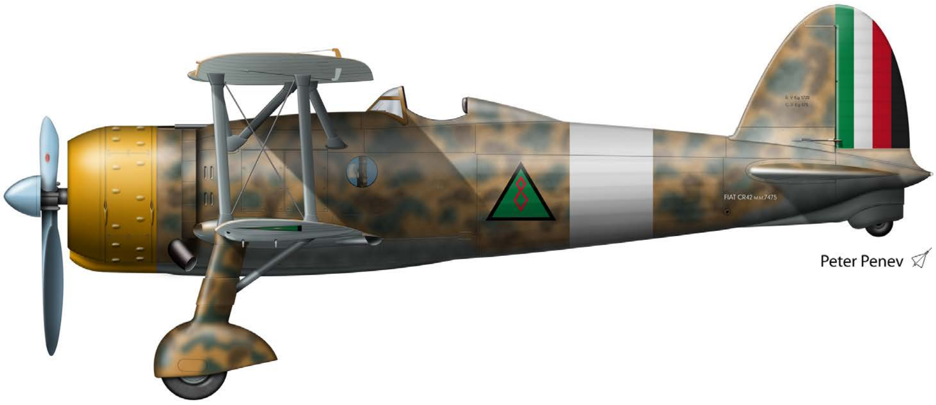
This Jumo 211F-2-powered version of the Heinkel He.111H-6 had more defensive armament than earlier variants. It is also one of those Heinkel He.111 H-6s which were fitted with either a remotely operated machine gun or a grenade launching tube at the very end of the fuselage. The upper surface green camouflage is in two distinct but similar shades and all the aeroplane's original German Luftwaffe markings have been crudely painted over. This includes the KG 4 unit insignia on the front fuselage. This shield-shaped badge had been a simplified version of one of the Wever family coat-of-arms which itself consisted of a white weaver's shuttle or *navette* on a red ground. The RIrAF triangle national markings under the wings are considerably smaller than the overpainted Luftwaffe crosses and the final letters of the aircraft's original identification code, AC, have been added in small white letters both on the rear fuselage and on the leading edge of the wing. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



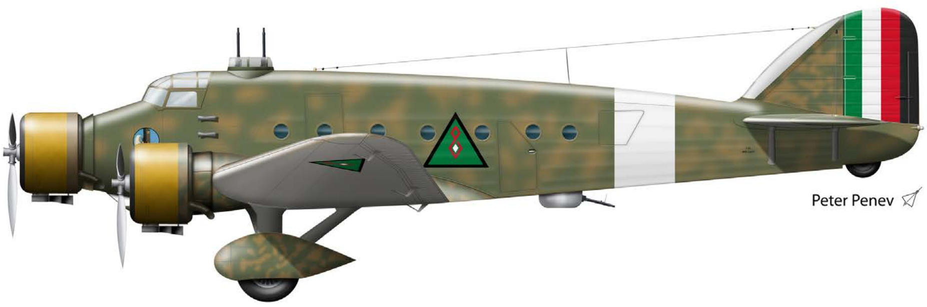
Of the transport aircraft allocated to the Luftwaffe contingent assembled to support the Iraqis during the brief Anglo-Iraq War of May 1941, only three reached Iraq. One of them was this Junkers Ju.90, originally built for Lufthansa but impressed for use by the Luftwaffe during the Second World War. The rudders of these early Junkers Ju.90s had substantial balancing horns, whereas later examples had oval tail units. On the other hand, the tail unit of this machine has a smooth skin whereas the first prototypes had traditional Junkers corrugated skin of their tail units. The few available photographs suggest that it had not been painted a camouflage colour and was still bare metal overall, except for the engine cowlings and nacelles which were an anti-dazzle black, as they had been in Lufthansa service. This particular Ju.90 had the German civil registration D-AEDS before the war and was named 'Preussen' (Prussia). Pressed into military service from March to April 1940, it was used by the Luftwaffe unit 4/KG zbV in support of the German invasion of Norway when it was given the individual identification code letters GF+GE. Supposedly returned to Deutsche Lufthansa with its original D-AEDS registration for the Iraqi operation, in reality it merely had its Luftwaffe markings replaced by Iraqi ones and the identification code GF+GE crudely overpainted. After the failed Iraqi mission, the aeroplane was reportedly again used by Lufthansa as D-AEDS 'Preussen' until April 1943 and was then returned to the Luftwaffe as GF+GE. It survived the Second World War to be handed over the victorious allies and was eventually scrapped in England. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



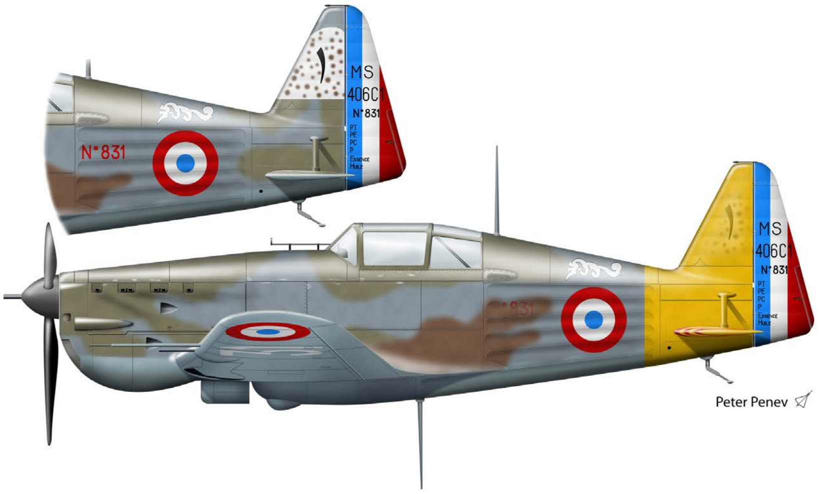
This Messerschmitt Bf.110E-1 was one of those visually confirmed as sent to Iraq: some sources suggest that the machines sent in support of the Iraqis during the Anglo-Iraq War of May 1941, were long range D-3 versions with an extended rear fuselage to accommodate a rescue dingy. If the information about the dingy container is correct, then they may in fact have been of the E-2 type which also has this feature. This particular Bf.110 is shown with long range fuel tanks beneath its wings, which were needed to get from its base in the Balkans to northern Iraq via the Italian Dodecanese Island and Vichy French ruled Syria. It formed part of the Luftwaffe's 4/ZG 76 squadron but the German national markings have been overpainted with RIrAF ones. It also retains most of its original Luftwaffe shades of grey camouflage scheme in the version where the upper surface colours cover the top but only part of the sides of the fuselage. The distinctive shark's mouth nose decoration and a white painted panel on top of the nose remain but the machine's four-letter identification code M8+GM on the fuselage has been overpainted with mid-grey paint. The last two letters of this Luftwaffe identification code are repeated on the rear fuselage in small white lettering on the light grey below the leading edge of the tail-plan. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



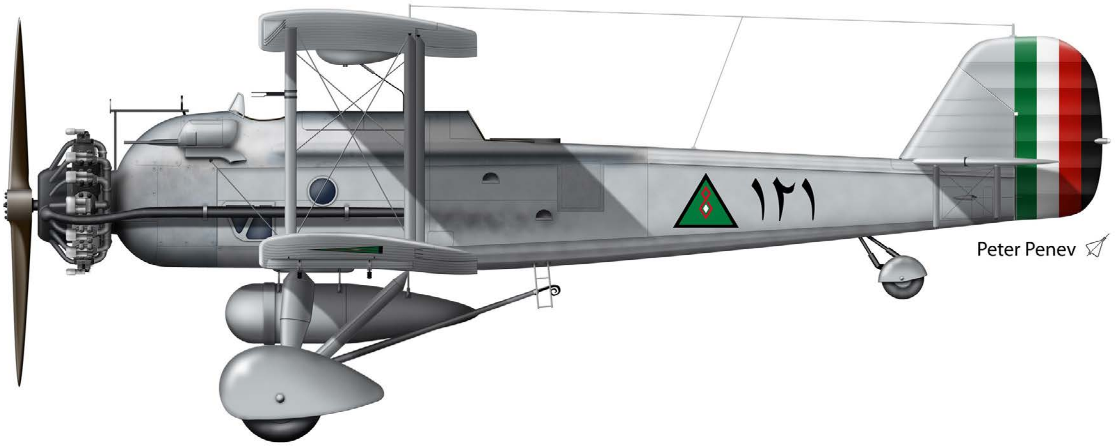
The 155th Fighter Squadron of the Regia Aeronautica had been allocated 12, factory new, Fiat CR.42s, each equipped with an additional fuel tank, armour for the pilot and RIrAF insignia, when this unit became part of the *Squadriglia Speciale Iraq* (Special Squadron Iraq). This particular machine survived the conflict in Iraq and returned to Rhodes where it would become part of No. 164 Squadron. Although most of the Fiat's Regia Aeronautica markings were removed before the mission to northern Iraq, the disc with the Fascist symbol was left on the sides of the fuselage below the cockpit. There was also a broad white band around rear fuselage and the engine cowling still appears to have been painted an overall deep yellow. The upper surface mottled camouflage pattern consists of Verde Mimetico (green 1090/96) and Marrone Mimetico or Bruno Mimetico (brown 1091/1095) as used by the Regia Aeronautica in the 'Mediterranean theatre'. The under surfaces are light grey. The type identification, FIAT CR 42 and serial number MM 7475, were painted in small white lettering on the rear fuselage while information about weights was written in small black lettering on the tail-fin. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



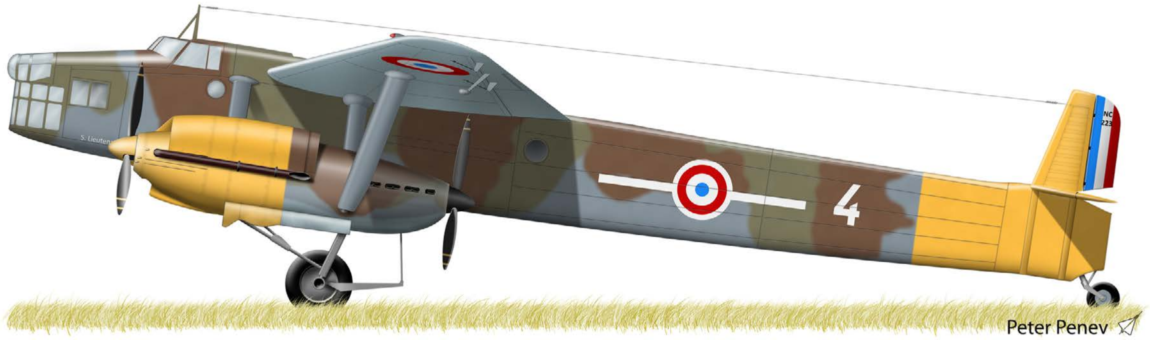
This was one of two Savoia Marchetti SM.81 bomber-transports allocated to the *Squadriglia Speciale Iraq*. It was equipped with a very powerful type A310 radio transmitter so that the Italian contingent could communicate from Iraq. However, this radio was damaged in a heavy landing during the flight to Iraq. Here both of the SM 81's upper and lower gun-turrets are shown in their retracted positions. In fact, the Savoia Marchetti SM 81 had heavy defensive armament consisting of six machine guns. When the upper turret was retracted, its gun barrels were positioned vertically, one behind the other, giving the impression that the aircraft had additional radio antennae. The Italian national markings have been painted out, except for the blue disc with the fasces symbol on the front fuselage below the cockpit. The upper surface of camouflage consists of two tones, with the darker being in large blotches, as was also seen on SM 81s which had been involved in the earlier Italian invasion of Greece. The under surfaces are light grey. Unfortunately, the correct military serial number of this aeroplane is currently unknown. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



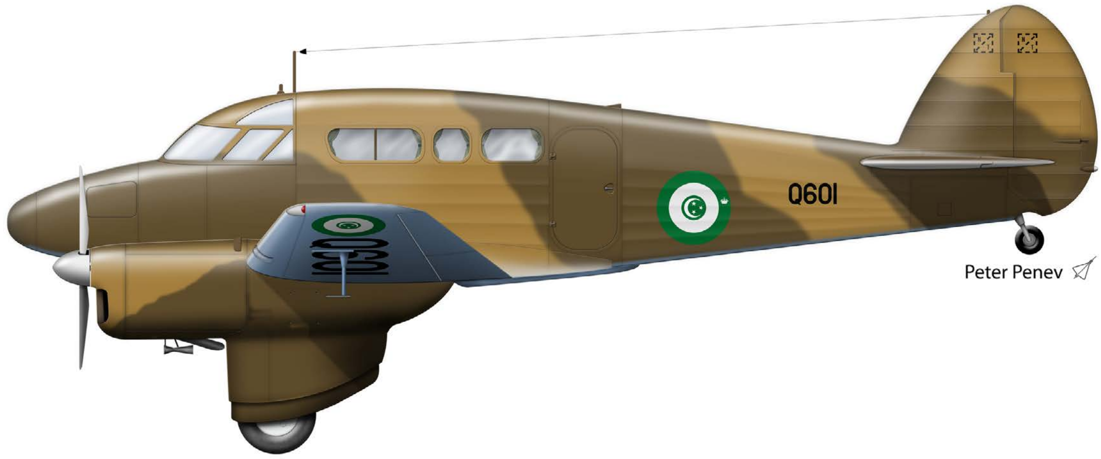
The Morane Saulnier MS.406s of 1 Esc. GC.1/7 were based in Syria and Lebanon at the time of the armistice. Here, this French unit showed its pride in its Middle Eastern associations by having each machine's individual code number written on the tail in Arabic rather than European numerals. In contrast, the unit badge consisting of a closed helmet with a long plume on the side of the fuselage was emphatically Western European. All the French military aeroplanes which continued to be based in Syria and Lebanon after the armistice which ended the Battle of France in late June 1940, are said to have had their tails and rear fuselages painted yellow. Quite when this was done and whether it was applied to all aircraft, remain unclear. It is also unclear whether the reduced size and spotted appearance of the white area behind the individual Arabic identification number were seen at the start of the war or were applied during the British invasion of Vichy-ruled Syria and Lebanon in 1941. Similarly, the date of a photograph of this machine after it made an emergency landing at Rayaq in Syria, showing the 'spotted' tail but not the yellow painted rear of the machine, is unknown. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



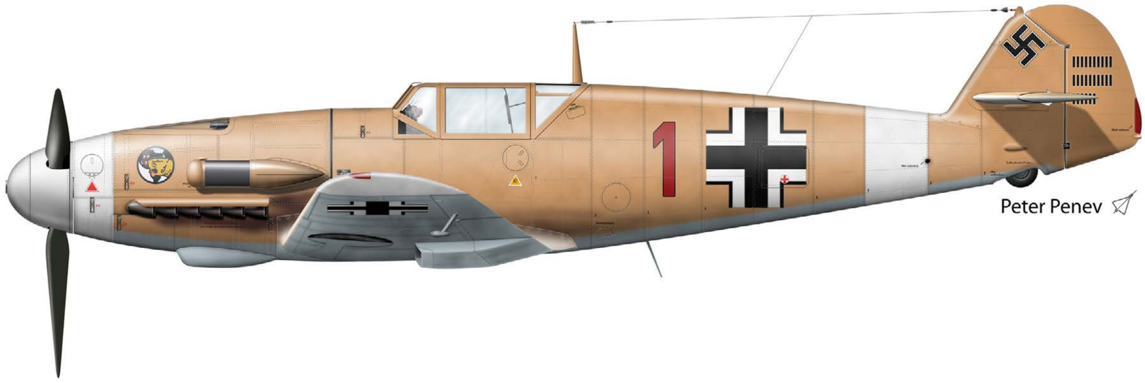
The six ex-RAF Vincent three-seater light bombers which the RIrAF acquired on 2 November 1939, two months after the start of the Second World War, remain something of a mystery. Five of them are known to have entered Iraqi service and were given serial numbers 120 to 124; number 121 being the subject of this profile. The Vincent was a general-purpose version of the Vickers Vildebeest which had been built in substantial numbers for the RAF. The main differences were the removal of torpedo-dropping equipment, the provision of a very large auxiliary fuel tank, the addition of a message-pick-up hook and the instillation of signalling flares. The aeroplane was powered by a 660 hp Bristol Pegasus IIIM3 engine. The previous RAF markings and serial number are understood to have been removed, along with a decorative stripe along the wheel-covering spats, before the painting of RIrAF national markings plus a large black Arabic serial number on the rear fuselage. There is no evidence that Iraqi Vincents had camouflage schemes and it is more likely that they remained in overall silver dope and bare metal as they had been during their previous RAF service. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



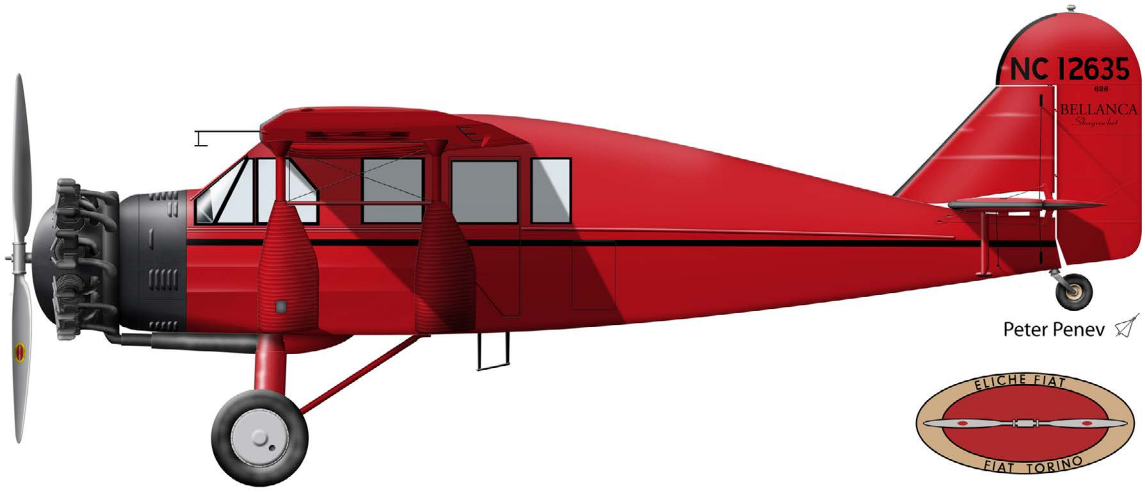
The Farman SNAC NC.223.3 was a quite advanced four-engine bomber, powered by four Hispano-Suiza 12 Y 29 engines, used by the French Armée de l'Air during the first years of the Second World War. This particular example, individual code number 4, was one of two which were then used by the Groupe de Bombardment GB.1/5 for long distance supply flights between France and Lebanon during the early part of 1941. They had been converted from bombers into transports and their armament was removed. Number 2 survived the British invasion of Vichy-ruled Syria and Lebanon. After its capture, the machine was used by the Free French Air Force. The name written in white on the side of the nose is S. Lieutenant CASSE. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



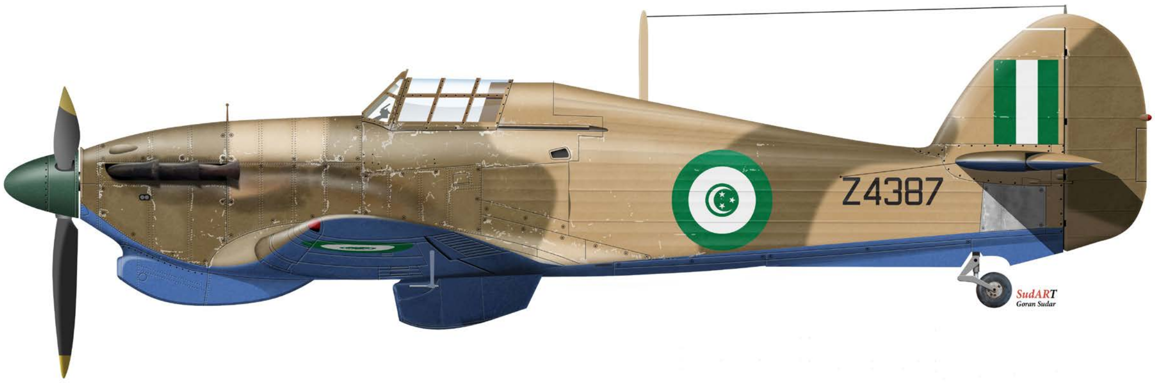
The REAF's two Percival Q.6 Petrels were part of No. 3 (Communications) Squadron REAF and more particularly the Royal Flight which formed part of this squadron. The overall colour scheme was probably an RAF style desert warfare sand and stone camouflage with azure blue underneath. There are normal REAF roundels on the wings and fuselage, where there is also a small crown in the outer ring. There are no national identification markings on the tail while the machine's black serial number Q601 is on the rear fuselage. Powered by two De Havilland Gipsy Six II engines which were designed for use with variable pitch propellers, the Percival Q.6 Petrel had a prominent horizontal air-vent below the engine cowling. This was not, however, the non-standard oil filter installed by Flight Lieutenant Ibrahim Gazerine to solve overheating problems caused by the engines' dry sump lubricating systems in Egypt's hot and dusty conditions. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



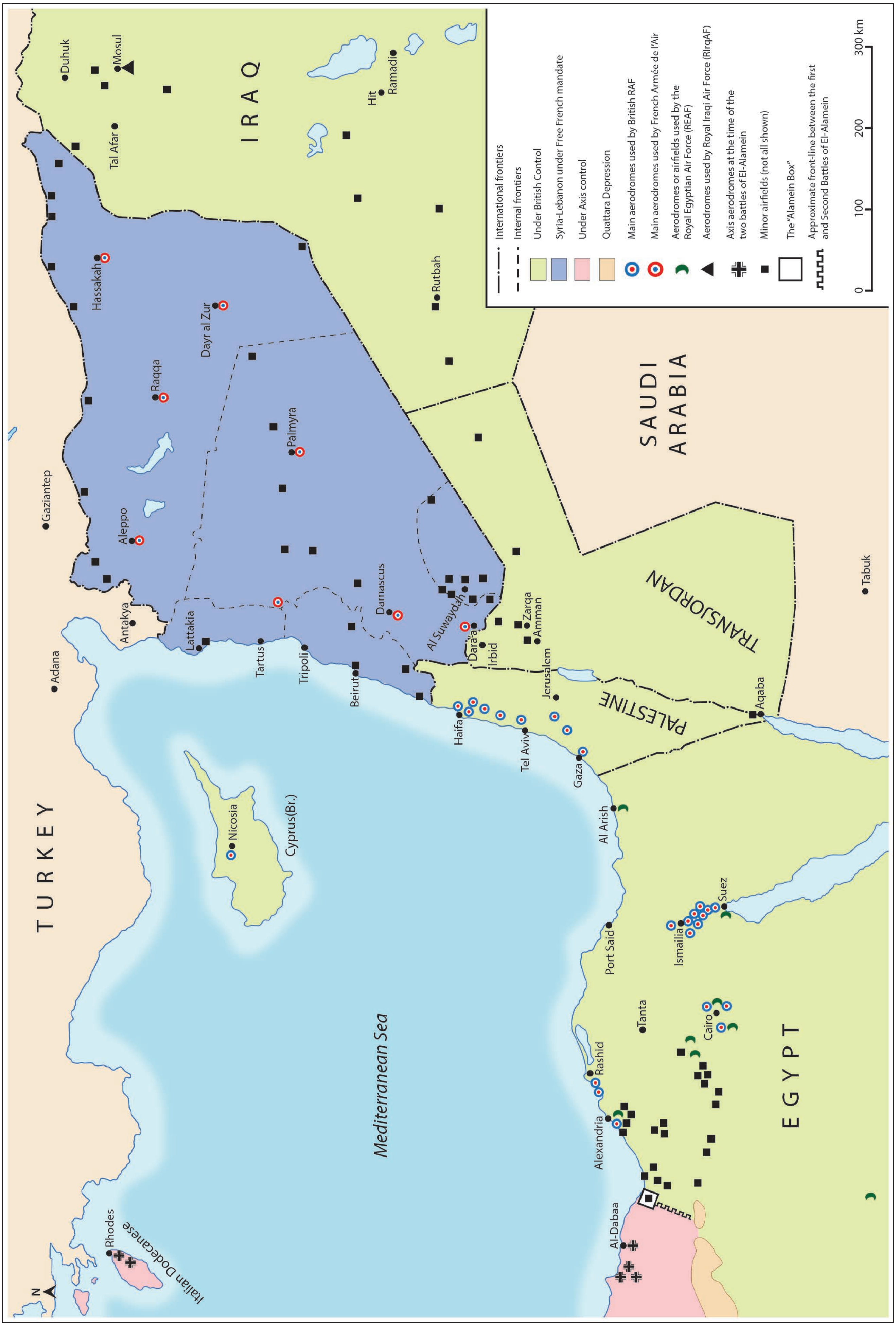
This Messerschmitt Bf.109F-4/trop of JG 27 'Afrika' was flown by Lieutenant Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt, the Staffelkapitän of 2./JG 27 when he shot down REAF Gladiator pilot Ahmad Sa'udi Hussain Abu Ali on 7 July 1942. Ahmad Sa'udi had taken off without authorisation and was heading for Marsa Matruh where he hoped to find General Erwin Rommel and give him a leather bag containing photographs and documents from a group of dissident Egyptian officers. The upper surfaces and sides were painted in deep sand yellow, the under surfaces in sky grey, with a white spinner and front part of the nose, a white band around the rear fuselage and white wingtips. It is shown with only 26 victory bars on the rudder, as Sa'udi's Gladiator would be Stahlschmidt's 27 victim. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



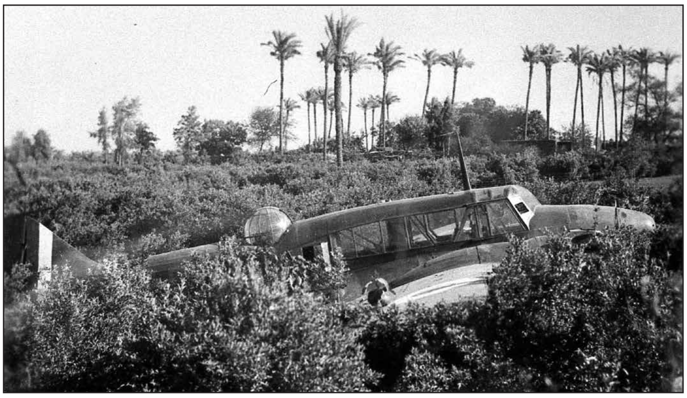
The Saudi Arabian Mining Syndicate tried to sell its Bellanca CH-400 Skyrocket (US registration NC12635) to the Saudi Arabian government but when the latter refused to buy, the company gave the machine to the Saudi Arabian Air Force. It is not known when or whether the Skyrocket was given an air force number or air force markings but it appears to have still be on the RSAF's strength at the start of The Second World War. The machine had an overall deep colour, most likely high visibility red, with a black trim. The edges and frames of the windows were also painted black in Saudi Arabia, having previously been white. The aircraft's engine cowling was similarly removed in Saudi Arabia, probably to improve the cooling of the Pratt & Whitney Wasp C 420 hp radial engine and the Skyrocket now has large, broad 'balloon' tyres. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



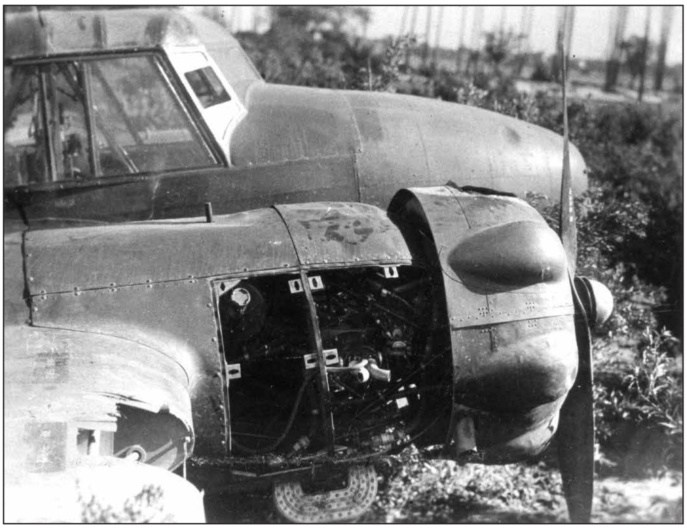
Although this Hawker Hurricane Mk.I Trop of No. 6 Squadron, REAF has been given Egyptian national markings, it still has its original RAF serial number Z4387 in black on the rear fuselage. It also has desert warfare 'sand and stone' camouflage with azure blue underneath because it is an ex-RAF aeroplane and had already served in the North Africa campaign. Furthermore, the sudden vertical line between the 'dark earth and middle stone' immediately behind the exhaust stubs suggests that the engine cowling, or at least the upper part of it, has come from a different aeroplane. The rudder similarly seems to have come from a different aeroplane, as the colour divisions again do not line up. Thirdly, an unpainted bare metal panel on the side of the end of the fuselage further suggested that this aeroplane underwent major repair work before it was handed over from the RAF to the REAF. The engine is a Rolls Royce Merlin III, while the spinner is an unknown mid-tone colour, perhaps the same bright green as the REAF national markings. While this aeroplane is armed with wing-mounted machine guns whose barrels do not protrude beyond the leading edges of the wings, it could have been armed with the larger cannon seen on later versions of the Hurricane. (Artwork by Goran Sudar)



(Map by George Anderson)



The Avro Anson (W205) in which General Aziz al-Masri attempted to fly from Cairo to Syria on 16th May 1941, after the pilot Husayn Zulfiqar Sabri had made an emergency landing in an orange grove or cotton field north of the Egyptian capital. (Ibrahim Gazerine collection)



A close-up photograph of the General Aziz al-Masri's Avro Anson's right engine which seized up because of an incorrectly set lubricating oil-cock. The aeroplane's serial number is also painted on the machine's metal propeller plus the letter R for "right". (Abd al-Rahman Zaki photograph)

The Avro Anson (W205) in which General Aziz al-Masri attempted to fly to Syria, seen from the left side. The aeroplane was retrieved, repaired and eventually repainted in overall silver dope. It was later photographed on a visit to Syria in 1946 or 1947. (EAF Museum collection)

have told his family the whole story. At his subsequent trial, General Aziz al-Masri claimed that prior to the flight, he had made contact with Colonel Thornhill of S.O.1. (A section of the British Special Operations Executive). The latter had been formed on 22 July 1940 and was responsible for secret and covert operations. Al-Masri persuaded Colonel Thornhill that he might be able to convince Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) to negotiate terms with the British before German and Italian forces arrived in Iraq to bolster the 'Iraqi rebellion'.

Some historians consider this to have been simply a cover story although certain senior British military and political figures in Egypt at the time, including the British ambassador Miles Lampson, considered it to be genuine. According to Lampson, he found that Colonel Thornhill had lunched with al-Masri on 12th May, just four days before the unauthorised flight. To quote the British ambassador:

> Colonel Thornhill's version of what happened, which I accept … El Masri had certain proposals to put before Brigadier Clayton [head of the Arab section of GHQ] and as the latter was away, he [Thornhill] was asked and accepted, to lunch with El Masri … [who] suggested that he be authorised to offer Dominion status [within the British Empire] to Iraq as part of a scheme whereby it should also be offered to other Arab countries including Egypt.

Colonel Thornhill did not encourage al-Masri but he did promise to pass on the idea to his superior in the intelligence service, Brig. Clayton.

The idea that currently – if somewhat theoretically – independent Iraq or Egypt could be encouraged to formally join the British Empire under any guise whatsoever, appalled the British government including Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. They understood full well that it would be interpreted as an attempted British Imperial takeover.

However, it remains clear that al-Masri and his supporters enjoyed support at quite high levels in the Egyptian armed forces and probably also in the civil administration. For example, Fred Weston of the British Advisory Mission attached to the Royal Flight at Almaza, recalled that when General al-Masri's pilot (probably Zulfiqar Sabri) arrived at Almaza, he was carrying official documents stating that he was on a special mission. This had supposedly been ordered by King Faruq himself and he was to fly al-Masri to the frontier on an urgent but otherwise unspecified, mission. An Avro Anson should therefore be made ready. The British Advisory Mission officer believed that all was legitimate and so the machine in question, one of the oldest Ansons in the REAF (serial number W205), was prepared. The hanger doors were then opened and W205 was either parked outside, or remained inside, ready for immediate flight.

According to Baghdadi, later on Thursday 15 May 1941, al-Masri's party returned to Almaza – or perhaps had never left the base – and went to the hanger where Zulfiqar Sabri roused the mechanic who because of the war situation, was guarding the Anson. This sleepy individual was also ordered to get the aeroplane ready for a flight later that night. Weston next recalled that the well-known veteran, Egyptian nationalist leader General Aziz al-Masri, appeared later in the evening with one of the most junior pilots in the Royal Flight (Zulfiqar), who was the duty officer of that day.

Unfortunately, from al-Masri's point of view, telling two mechanics on two separate occasions to prepare the aeroplane for flight would prove disastrous. The Avro Anson had an oil tank that was higher than the engine sump when the machine was at rest so the oil cocks were supposed to be closed when the aeroplane was on the ground.

Baghdadi's version of the story stated that the first mechanic quite correctly opened these oil cocks, ready for the engines to be started but failed to inform the pilot that he had done so. As a result, the pilot – either Abd al-Ra'uf or Zulfiqar Sabri, ordered a second

Another of the REAF's Westland Lysanders with the new markings, desert camouflage scheme and RAF-style individual code letters applied during the early years of the war. The serial numbers had by now been removed from beneath the sky-blue undersides of the wings and a new style of Egyptian roundels were applied which were easier to distinguish at a distance from those of the British RAF. (Author's collection)

Egyptian Army anti-aircraft battery in a sandbagged position, photographed during 1942. (Albert Grandolini collection)

mechanic to do this immediately prior to take off and by turning the oil cocks, the mechanic actually closed them again. Weston, however, suggested that the duty ground crew were not familiar with the Anson and therefore did not open the oil cocks in the first place. Ali Sabri (Jr.), when interviewed by the author in Heliopolis in December 2011, repeated Baghdadi's version but added that the pilots took off in a hurry and therefore, failed to check what the mechanic had done.

The actual take off was at around 0100 in the early hours of Friday 16 May. Baghdadi wrote that al-Masri and the two pilots boarded the Anson, started the engines and immediately taxied for take off without making further checks. This was because the sleeping quarters of the resident British Advisory Mission officers were immediately behind the hanger and they did not want further questions to be asked. At this point the story becomes even stranger, according to the somewhat unreliable memoirs of Major Alfred William Sansom (*I Spied Spies*, London 1965). He was a British intelligence officer who had himself been born Cairo.

Sansom claimed to have got wind of the plot and to have hurried to Almaza with *Amir Alay* (Colonel) Hijazi (Hegazi), the Head of Egyptian Army Intelligence. In fact, he claimed that he was actually speaking to the Commander of Almaza (Muhammad Abd al-Mu'min al-Miqaati who would have been most unlikely to have been in his office at one o'clock in the morning) when a corporal brought a message that Zulfica Sabri had just taken off with General al-Masri and would not be coming back. Sansom and Hijazi then supposedly chased the aeroplane down the runway in Hijazi's car, whereupon the Anson failed to take off and hit a boundary fence; after which all three on board were arrested. The latter part of this story is entirely fictional and therefore casts doubt on the rest of Major Sansom's account.

In reality, the Anson (W205) took off and, according to Fred Weston, was in the air for about 10 minutes before the engines seized because of a lack of lubricating oil. According to Fu'ad (Fouad) Sabri, one engine stopped and as those aboard intended to fly across the Nile Delta and the Mediterranean Sea to Beirut, they either turned back or immediately made a forced landing, having flown about 30 kilometres. Possibly, the second engine also seized up before they could get back to Almaza. Whatever the truth, the pilot, Zulfiqar Sabri, made a successful forced landing in the dark between 0120 and 0130 am near Qalyub, north of Cairo at the base of the Nile Delta, close to where the two main branches of the Nile separate.

On that night, the phase of the moon was 'waning gibbous', (between full and its final quarter), so if there no cloud, the moonlight would have been quite strong. Baghdadi wrote that the landing was in a field of citrus fruits although some other sources state that it was a field of cotton. Photographs suggest that the former was probably correct. Whatever the phase of the moon, this

While the Egyptian Army guarded Cairo's vital bridges, the Egyptian Coastguard patrolled the Nile river itself. (Egyptian Military Museum collection)

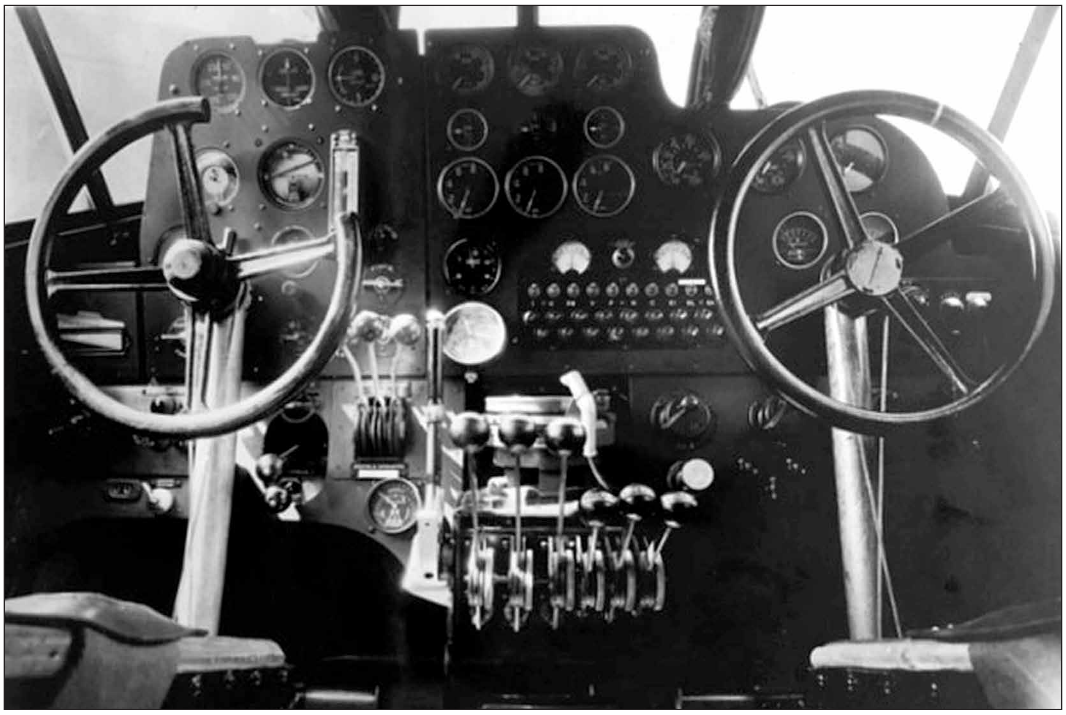
The De Havilland DH 86 Express short-haul airliners of Misr Air were expected to be available for casualty evacuation during the North African Campaign. Although it is unclear whether they were ever used in this role, their crews were trained for it, as shown in this photograph which also shows Misr Air pilot Ahmad Isma'il standing on the left. (Ahmad Isma'il archive)

was still an emergency night landing and Zulfiqar also managed to avoid several rows of tall palm trees, which says a great deal for his skill as a pilot.

An Egyptian newspaper report of the time maintained that the Anson had been compelled to land by the Air Control Authorities, which is clearly not true; that it had hit some telegraph poles and 'fallen into a garden'. Anwar Sadat wrote that the aeroplane came down 'in a tree'. Photographs show neither damage to the Anson nor telegraph poles in the area. General al-Masri then made his way to the local police officer or *ma'mur,* where he announced his identity, stated that his car had broken down and requested that he be allowed to borrow the local police car. This was agreed, whereupon al-Masri and his two companions either drove or were driven, to Shubra, a suburb on the northern side of Cairo where they took a taxi and for a while, disappeared.

When the Egyptian Police examined the stranded Avro Anson, they found not only the occupants' identifiable luggage but also maps and flight plans indicating their intention to fly to Beirut. Unless al-Masri, Abd al-Ra'uf and Zulfiqar Sabri had been most uncharacteristically careless, these findings suggest that the three were confident of their 'cover story'. Nevertheless, they now decided to go into hiding and when news reached Egyptian Prime Minister, Husain Sirry Pasha, he was furious and had Russell Pasha, the head of the Cairo Police, 'on the mat' for the police's supposed inefficiency. The government also offered a reward of £1,000 Egyptian for information leading to the capture of any or all, of the three missing officers.

According to a subsequent British Middle East Intelligence Centre Summary dated 22 May, there was a noticeable lack of cooperation between the Egyptian Army Intelligence Service and the Egyptian Police, with the police believing that some in the Intelligence Service may actually have assisted the fugitives' escape.



The interior of the cockpit of one of Misr Airline's De Havilland DH 86 Express aircraft, showing the pilot and co-pilots controls. (Ahmad Ismail archive)

While Colonel Hatton of the Egyptian Frontier Administration took a patrol to search the Western Desert Oases, in Cairo's southern suburb of Ma'adi, Zulfiqar Sabri's parents were appalled when they saw the face of their son staring back at them from all the national daily newspapers. Leading the media pack was *Al-Ahram* which announced that;

> The 61-year-old former Army Inspector General, Aziz al-Masry Pasha and two Air Force officers had crash-landed a military aeroplane … One of the pilots is Hussain-Zulfiqar Sabri, aged 25. Encouraged by the retired Pasha, the two officers hijacked the Anson 205 [referring to the machine's serial number W20] plane at Almaza Airport in an attempt to fly out of Egypt under cover of darkness. While the flight's destination is yet to be determined, it

Gen. Aziz al-Masri (right) and one of his pilots, Tayyar Thani (Pilot Off.) Husayn Zulfiqar Sabri (left), looking relieved after their acquittal on a charge of attempting to fly out of Egypt to a hostile country. (Nour Bardai collection)

Tayyar Thani Husayn Zulficar Sabri (left) and Tayyar Thani Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf (right) after their acquittal on the main charge of desertion, though they were still convicted of "taking off without orders". (Nour Bardai collection)

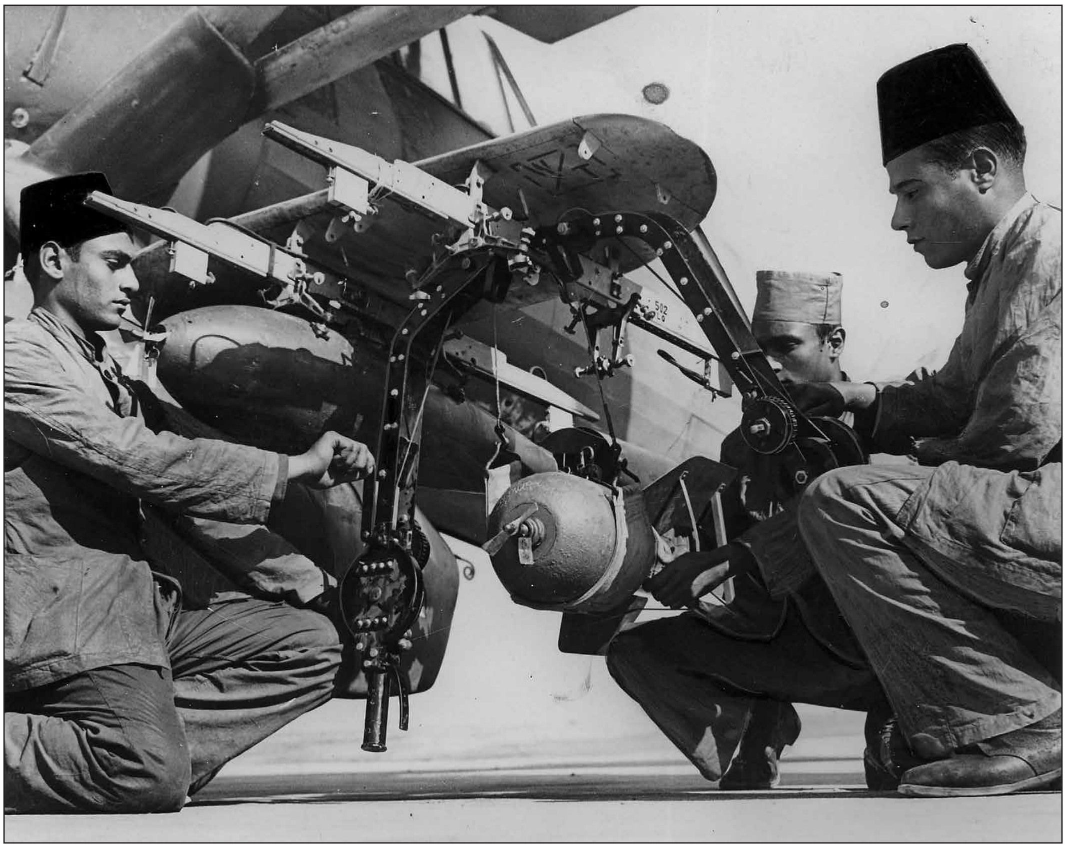
> is believed Aziz Pasha either wanted to meet up with Rashid Ali, who recently led an anti-British coup in Baghdad, or had plans to join Field Marshal Rommel, who is presently with his troops in nearby Libya.

According to Baghdadi, the fugitives actually took refuge in the house of one of Abd al-Ra'uf's friends, Abd al-Qadir Rizaq, in the suburb of Imbaba.

While this was going on, Axis air-raids continued and by early June 1941, some 650 civilians had been killed in Alexandria alone, causing 300,000 people – almost half the current population – to flee from the city. It was under these circumstances and in the light of Rommel's seemingly unstoppable counter-attack in the Western Desert, that the British started to lend a more sympathetic ear to the REAF's demands for more modern fighters to enable the Egyptian Air Force to make a real contribution to the air defence of Egypt. This was especially urgent because the great majority of RAF fighters had been rushed to the front, leaving the Egyptian heartlands and the Suez Canal virtually unprotected, apart from the archaic Gladiators of No. 2 Squadron outside Cairo and those of No. 5 Squadron at Suez. For its part, the Egyptian Army increased its garrison in the increasingly exposed Oasis of Siwa. Perhaps partly as a result, none of the Lysanders of No. 1 Squadron seem to have been based at Suez.

Alexandria, Suez and the Canal were now under serious attack. For example, as night fell on 7 June, a large number of Junkers Ju 88s bombed first, Alexandria and then Suez. They faced anti-aircraft fire but reported seeing no night fighters. Once again, the pilots of No. 5 Squadron at Suez could offer no realistic response. In June, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid flew three sorties in Gladiator N5755, four in L9039, one in L9039 and one in N5764 or N5767, three of which were patrols, two 'air to air firing' training, one FCG (Fighter Control Group) training and three unspecified.

Small wonder that he and his colleagues were becoming disillusioned with their role in the war. The month of June in Abu Zaid's log-book was signed off by an unnamed officer so it is possible that Hassan Mahmud, the previous CO, was away in Cairo either on leave or called as a witness in the trial of General Aziz al-Masri or perhaps he had simply been promoted to a staff role. There is no evidence that he was ever involved in any disaffection and it is also possible that *Qa'id Sirb* Muhammad Hafiz was already in the process of taking over command of No. 5 Squadron



A particularly fine study of one of the REAF's now camouflaged Westland Lysanders, taken by one of the newspaper *Al-Ahram's* photographers. It shows bombs being attached to the stub wings on the aeroplane's undercarriage. The picture is so detailed that the Lysander's serial number, 502 (abbreviated from Y502), can be seen in small lettering on the bomb-carrier. The even smaller letters LO probably mean "left outer " and refer to the bomb-carrier itself. (EAF Museum collection)

General Aziz al-Masri was reportedly discovered and arrested on 6 June, after almost three weeks in hiding. Supposedly, he was found by chance by the Egyptian police. According to Fred Weston's more colourful account, the Egyptian military and civilian police had been hot on the trail of the three fugitives since the day they went missing; one of the pilots having been found first, soon followed by the other and then by General al-Masri himself, 'in the appartement of a lady friend'. Another version has all three officers being found on 6 June, in a house overlooking the Nile in the suburb of Imbaba. According to Baghdadi, the police had been ordered to 'attack' this house by the Egyptian Prime Minister. The policemen involved were therefore pleased and relieved when no violence was required.

What is not yet known is the role, if any, of the Egyptian 'Special Police' in tracking down Aziz al-Masri. One of this unit's most senior officers had been, still was, or soon would be, Prince Amr Muhammad Wahid al-Din Ibrahim. He had been one of the first Egyptian to learn to fly (see Volume Four) and as the son of Prince Muhammad Wahid al-Din Ibrahim and Princess Saliha Ibrahim Isma'il, he was sometimes viewed as a contender for the Egyptian throne.

Currently enjoying a great deal of support amongst what were described as 'certain circles', Prince Amr Ibrahim came to be seen as an actual or potential enemy of the group of nationalist officers who supported General Aziz al-Masri and subsequently coalesced around Colonel Nasser as the 'Free Officers Movement'. Consequently, after the Free Officers' coup of 1952, Prince Amr Ibrahim would be blacklisted as a threat to the new Egyptian order.

The 'al-Masri Affair', as it was called in the Egyptian press, certainly polarised public opinion. A minority sided with Prime Minister Husain Sirry's pro-British government whilst the majority followed the opposition Wadf Party who sympathised with General al-Masri. Clearly, the Egyptian government and the British in Egypt, took the matter seriously – at least for a while. When Zulfiqar Sabri's father, Abbas Baligh Sabri, was interviewed by a journalist from *Al-Ahram* in the villa in Ma'adi, the old man appeared outwardly calm and insisted that civil disobedience must be avoided at all costs. He was quoted as saying:

> I was educated in the United Kingdom where tribulations of this nature become second nature. I raised my son to be self-assured and to believe in the principal of self-determination. In this case, like in many others, he made his own decision and did not seek anyone's approval.

The authorities were also worried that the three would emerge as national heroes, especially as Egypt's best-known lawyers volunteered to represent al-Masri and his fellow officers. In fact, Baligh Sabri's next-door neighbour, the renowned lawyer Ahmad Naguib al-Hilali Bey, took on Zulfiqar's defence. Ten years later, Hilali, by then a Pasha, became King Faruq's last Prime Minister, having already served as such for four months earlier in 1952. His second term lasted for just one day before Colonel Nasser's Coup of July 1952. The authorities also allowed Aziz al-Masri to have a small operation on his nose while in custody which could indicate that the General had been slightly hurt during the Anson's forced landing. He was also sent to a military hospital because he was suffering from asthma.

When General al-Masri and his Air Force colleagues were at last put on trial following some considerable delay, the General claimed to have been working with or even for, British intelligence. The two REAF men stated that they were merely obeying the orders of a senior officer. When al-Masri's claim to have discussed his plan with a British intelligence officer was shown to be correct, the case against all three virtually collapsed. Many REAF personal were also called as witnesses while some of the journalists attending the trial described it as the funniest they had ever seen. In fact, the only remaining charge against the three was 'taking off without orders' – of which Abd al-Ra'uf and Zulfiqar Sabri were eventually convicted.

The British intelligence officer in question was also sacked, despite the fact that he stated that he had never officially approved al-Masri's hare-brained scheme. British trust in the REAF was further eroded while the Egyptian and British authorities now kept General Aziz al-Masri under close surveillance. They would eventually intern him in the aftermath of a further scandal in 1942. The pilots, instead of facing the death penalty for treason, spent a year in the relatively comfortable Foreigners Prison near Cairo's Bab al-Hadid Station. They would be released by a new Egyptian Prime Minister, Nahas Pasha, who was returned to office on British insistence on 6 February 1942.

Elsewhere, the successes and the setbacks of German and Italian forces in North Africa under the command of Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel, caused a major rethink of British strategy in and around Egypt. Eventually, Rommel – 'The Desert Fox' – caused near panic amongst the British in Cairo, as well as confusion and concern amongst the Egyptians.

British Advisory Mission's Report Number 17 on the Egyptian Army, dated June 1941, was drawn up in the middle of this crisis. It surveyed a situation which was different to that which had gone before; the newly arrived Germans and the revitalised Italians currently forcing back British and Imperial troops. Elsewhere, a British and Imperial invasion of Italian East Africa had been largely successful and although the fighting would continue for many more months, the Italian threat to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and southern Egypt, had been removed. The Egyptian Army garrison at Wadi Halfa was therefore withdrawn, partly to reinforce the 5,000 Egyptian troops currently garrisoning the Suez Canal and western defences of Cairo. Furthermore, the Egyptian government had expressed a willingness to hand over the army's reserve equipment to the British as well as its coastal artillery.

The British had not expected energetic leadership from King Faruq and they were not disappointed. However, the Egyptian government continued to be much more helpful. Egyptian morale remained good and the British declared that the current Minister of War, Hassan Sadiq 'was best for a long time'. Whilst the Egyptian Army handed over many of its spare parts to the British, the British did not deliver anything new to the Egyptians who were, nevertheless expected to continue the duties allocated to them since the outbreak of war. Indeed, a new and urgent duty would be added to Egyptian military responsibilities; namely spotting, reporting and searching for air-dropped mines in the Suez Canal.

The dropping of mines by enemy aircraft actually started in June 1941, leading to a need for ever greater numbers of observation posts drawn from infantry, cavalry, anti-aircraft and machine gun units. The result was, according to British reports, a 'decided success' and by October 1941, over 70 parachute mines had been accurately located. Air Observation units in various parts of the country, including those along the Canal, were increased to one cavalry regiment, 10 troops of light anti-aircraft artillery, four rifle and two machine gun battalions, making a total of about 5,000 men. There was also a significant increase in the numbers of uniformed Egyptian Labour Corps Companies.

Previously, a general relaxation meant that the Egyptian Defence Budget for 1941-42 was lower than that for 1940–41 but another British retreat in the Western Desert, meant that Egyptian military training had to be interrupted. Most Egyptian troops in the Sudan were hurriedly brought back to Egypt, including Gamal Abd al-Nasser who found himself transferred to an Egyptian unit near al-Alamain. Here, according to Nasser, he and his men would 'defend the British rear' during the forthcoming two battles of Alamain.

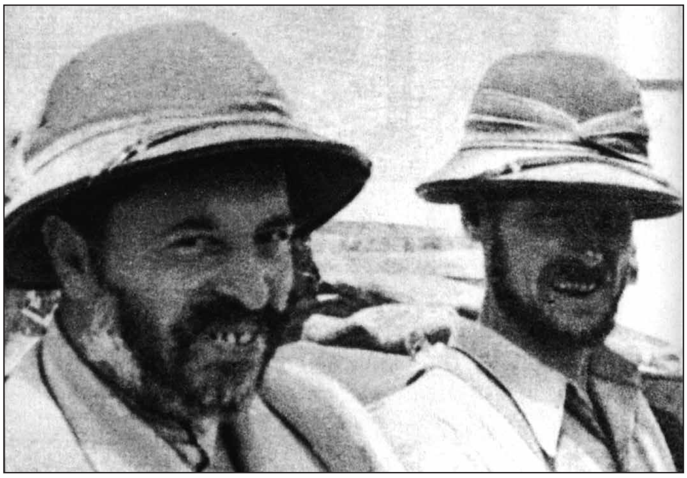
In the First Battle of al-Alamein (1–27 July 1942), British and Allied forces halted Rommel's drive eastwards towards the Egyptian heartlands. In August 1942, in the aftermath of this battle, the Egyptian Army took overall responsibility for guarding the Suez Canal, thus releasing more British and Imperial troops for more active operations in the Western Desert. A further British success at the Second Battle of al-Alamain (23 October to 11 November 1942) by General Montgomery's Eighth Army, as British and Allied forces in Egypt were now called, would be followed by a relentless push westward which eventually expelled the remaining forces from North Africa in February 1943.

Back in 1941 however, Axis air-raids on the Suez Canal and its facilities were frequent, with Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries often being in action. In fact, Egyptian anti-aircraft achieved 'good results' against enemy aeroplanes that had to fly relatively low and slow to drop their parachute mines although they also suffered casualties. Similarly, the REAF Gladiator fighter squadron based in Suez also did what it could with its now outclassed equipment. Meanwhile, Egyptian Frontier Forces continued to patrol the Red Sea coasts. In the Mediterranean, the daring and originality of the Italian Navy made the siting of coastal and harbour defence guns increasingly difficult. Therefore, in October 1941, work was started on a new coastal defence system for Alexandria, this time against the threat from small, fast surface vessels rather than submarines. An Egyptian Signals unit was similarly organised for Alexandria harbour.

However, the British view of Egyptian troops remained, at best, patronising. This was clearly shown by a British Foreign Office official named Lasky who wrote in November 1941: All things considered, the Egyptian Army has acquitted itself better than might have been expected. The new Egyptian Chief of General Staff, Ibrahim Atallah, had been helpful though he was described by the British as, 'soldierly but having limited knowledge'. The Egyptian Army's Inspector General Hassan Husni Zaydi had once been regarded as anti-British but now proved to be the most capable senior officer in the Egyptian Army, helpful, energetic and capable. The Adjutant General Muhammad Hamdi Tahir was similarly considered helpful while also being an effective disciplinarian.

On the negative side, the British criticised the Egyptian Quarter Master General Abd al-Hamid Hafiz as weak while the current Director General of the Frontiers Administration, Zaki Pasha Hakim, was simply described as 'a passenger'. Nevertheless, the British Advisory Mission's Report Number 18 of October 1941 was supercilious but encouraging, even where the often-criticised senior command of the Egyptian Army was concerned. It also looked forward to the introduction of a new and fairer conscription law which would hopefully improve morale in the lower ranks. Even so, it bemoaned the fact that when the British Army returned the numerous vehicles it had borrowed from the Egyptian Army, these were virtually worn out.

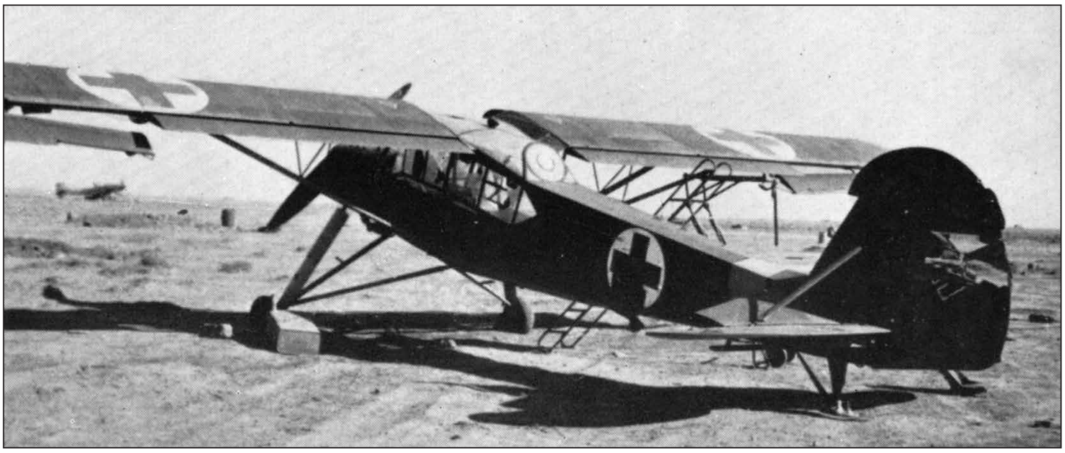
On 7 June 1941, an enemy air-raid had hit one of the Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries, killing 24 men but the battery had nevertheless continued firing. A Lewis gun position at Alexandria had also been hit, one man being killed, yet the position also continued firing. All the serviceable Luftwaffe Ju 88s of I. and II./LG 1 had taken off at sunset to attack Alexandria first, then flying on to attack Suez. It was a major effort with over 30 German bombers reaching their targets and facing anti-aircraft fire but no enemy fighters. After this raid, LG 1 was sent to Syria to support the Vichy French forces.


The German agents Klein (left) and Muehlenbruch (right) whom the Luftwaffe unsuccessfully attempted to take behind Allied lines in Egypt in 1942. They were to have been tasked with making contact with dissidents within the Egyptian armed forces. (Blume family archive)

Elsewhere, an Egyptian Lewis gun position at Port Sa'id had been wiped out during another air-raid. As part of the internal security effort against what was seen as, the real possibility of an assault by German or Italian paratroopers against railheads and junctions, a number of concrete pillboxes had been constructed. Unfortunately, there were still too few Egyptian troops to cover the entire area. Nevertheless, most official British reports agreed that throughout this period, Egyptian military and civilian morale remained firm; even after General Rommel, his German Afrika Korps and Italian units, tumbled the British Army back across the Libyan-Egyptian border in May 1941.

Most of the Italian air-raids were launched from the Dodecanese Islands, notably Rhodes. However, the distances involved meant that their impact was limited and they also suffered losses. For example, the first night raid against Alexandria on 21–22 June, involved a dozen S.81s of 39 Stormo BT. Although the Gladiators of No. 80 Squadron RAF tried to intercept the Italian bombers, they failed to make contact. On the other hand, one S.81 was hit by anti-aircraft guns and had to make a forced landing in the Mediterranean on its way home, the crew being rescued by a Cant.Z.506B seaplane also based at Rhodes. No. 80 did intercept a daylight assault by nine S.79s of 34 Gruppo BT which attacked Alexandria and damaged two of the Italian bombers which nevertheless got home. There was then a year-long pause in daylight raids because the risk of interception was seen to be too great.

Though it would not be until 1942 that many in the Egyptian political establishment and in the military lost faith in a British victory, the war had by then, deepened existing divisions of Egyptian politics. For example, King Faruq demonstrating his independence from the British by refusing the Wafd Party government's demand that he dismiss their great rival, Ali Mahir of the Sa'adist Party, as chief of the monarch's royal or palace cabinet. Indeed, the clash of personalities between the young King Faruq and Mustafa Nahas, the older leader of the Wafd Party, almost became a personal feud. Worse still, this overlapped into differing attitudes towards the war in which Faruq was suspected of almost pro-Axis sympathies



A Fieseler Fi 156 Storch of the Luftwaffe's Desert Rescue Squadron, captured at Gambut January 1942. A similar machine rescued Major Ritter and his surviving comrades, after their He 111 ditched into the Mediterranean following the failed attempt to land the spies Klein and Muehlenbruch in the desert west of Cairo. (Squadron Leader Tester photograph)

whilst Nahas came to symbolise a pro-Allied and paradoxically, pro-British position.

Meanwhile, having failed to get General Aziz al-Masri out of Egypt, Major Nikolaus Ritter of the German Abwehr tried to get German secret agents into the country. The most successful plan again involved two Heinkel He.111s of the 10th Fliegerkorps and would be launched from Axis-occupied Greece. The two agents involved were named Muehlenbruch and Klein. The former was 40 years old and had run a small shipping business, apparently with a single boat which sailed up and down the Palestinian coast before the Second World War. The latter was 45 years old, was Jewish, originally came from Hamburg in northern Germany and had lived in Alexandria between the wars before returning to Germany to work in a munitions factory. There, he had volunteered to return to Egypt as a secret agent.

Here, it should be noted that the Abwehr was one of the least Nazi parts of the German Wehrmacht or Army. As the historian Saul Kelly told the author

> He (Klein) was one of the Palestinian German Jews, hence his knowledge of the Middle East. The Abwehr were not like the racial fanatics of the SS. They were prepared to use anyone who could help their espionage.

Major Ritter's plan was for Muehlenbruch, Klein and a suitably inconspicuous Italian-made motorbike to be flown into Egypt aboard a Heinkel He.111. The same aircrews would be used as had flown Ritter's earlier attempt to extract General al-Masri but in the event, one of the pilots had to be changed. The aircraft were being prepared to take off from Darna in eastern Libya when one of the tyres on the Heinkel to be flown by the less experienced pilot, was found to be badly worn. This was the aeroplane which was supposed to land in the desert with Ritter and the two spies on board. There was no time to get it replaced so Ritter, Muehlenbruch and Klein got aboard the second Heinkel, leaving the inexperienced pilot and his plane to undertake the role of escort.

They took off, climbed to over 3,500m to avoid a Saharan sandstorm, then headed towards the selected landing point on a curving course over the oases of Jaghbub and Siwa. The flight took five hours before they reach a still unidentified spot just under 100km north of what Ritter later described as 'the lone peak'. László Almásy had selected this as the most suitable landmark. The sun was setting (sunset in Cairo being at 1957 hrs on this day) which made stones and relatively small undulations in the ground cast frighteningly long shadows. The young pilot of the Heinkel refused to land, knowing that he would get the blame if anything went wrong, leaving Major Ritter with no alternative but to abort the mission.

On their way home, the two aeroplanes became separated. Furthermore, they heard on their radios that Darna aerodrome was under attack by the RAF so they headed for Benghazi instead. Not only did they not have enough fuel for this extra distance but the Heinkel wasted more fuel taking evasive action when confronted by a British aeroplane. In the end, there was no alternative but to ditch in the sea, as close to the coast as possible. Ritter suffered a broken arm, one of the aircrew suffered fractured ribs and the Jewish secret agent Klein, a badly bruised arm. The other spy, Muehlenbruch, was crushed by a crate – perhaps containing the motorbike – and was said to have been killed by the impact. He certainly never got out of the sinking aeroplane. The others were eventually washed ashore after clinging to a life-raft for nine hours. They then walked a long way before they found a Libyan village where they were eventually picked up by Fieseler Fi156 Storchs of the Luftwaffe's Desert Rescue Squadron. The injured were sent to hospital in Greece but the ultimate fate of agent Klein, remains unknown.

The political crisis in Cairo came to a head early in 1942 when, as Allied forces fell back before Rommel's advance, the British government demanded that a new and more friendly Egyptian government by installed. King Faruq refused such a curt demand but the British authorities were not in a mood to discuss the matter further and instead sent troops to surround the Abdin Palace in the heart of Cairo. Their tanks did so on the night of 4 February, effectively forcing the Egyptian ruler to do what the British ambassador demanded – namely to appoint Mustafa Nahas the new Egyptian Prime Minister.

Seen from a British perspective, this was necessary ruthlessness in desperate circumstances and the new government of Nahas Pasha would certainly prove itself a loyal ally. Seen from an Egyptian point of view, however, it was another example of how the British 'occupiers' treated Egypt with contempt. In particular, the officers of the Egyptian Army felt humiliated; their widespread reaction being summed up by General Mohammed Naguib when he wrote to King Faruq: 'Since the Army was given no opportunity to defend your Majesty I am ashamed to wear my uniform. I hereby request permission to resign'. Permission was refused but, as a much more junior officer, Lieutenant Gamal Abd al-Nasser who had recently been transferred from the Western Desert to teach at the Military Academy in Cairo, stated to a friend 'As for the army, it has been thoroughly shaken. Until now the officers only talked of how to enjoy themselves. Now they are speaking of sacrificing their lives for their honour'.

This so-called 'Abdin Palace Incident' was followed by a purge of the Egyptian Army and REAF, removing those men accused or suspected of anti-British subversion. Most were to some degree, associates of General Aziz al-Masri; many part of an unofficial group of ultra-royalists within the Egyptian armed forces called 'The Ring of Iron', dedicated to removing the British from Egypt. Believing that Britain was losing the war – a far from uncommon opinion across most of the world at that time – they wanted Egypt to obtain the best possible terms from the soon-to-be victorious Germans.

Other influential members were General Naguib who was later, the first President of the Egyptian Republic, Colonel Abd al-Rahman Zaki the Director General of the Egyptian Ministry of Defence and subsequently, director of the Military Museum in Cairo and Colonel Sayid Mahmud Taha, a future hero of the Palestine War who currently commanded the Alexandria garrison. As Colonel Abd al-Rahman Zaki explained to the author when they met in Cairo in April 1973, none of these men were pro-Nazi or pro-Fascist and indeed, several of them would have preferred a British victory but they had lost hope of such an outcome.

The columns of smoke rising from the grounds of the British Embassy in Cairo during July 1942, where the staff were busily burning documents to prevent them falling into enemy hands, did little to reassure the Egyptians. The British were not quite yet in a panic but they were certainly involved in contingency planning in case Rommel broke through into the Egyptian heartlands. This included revised planning concerning the role of the Egyptian Army and the REAF, the details of which have not been made public. They are also said to have envisaged a scorched earth policy in the Delta and parts of the Nile Valley where millions of Egyptian civilians lived. It focused on the destruction of major industries, capital projects, communications and the media.

Meanwhile, there appears to have been no evidence of what the British called sedition in the lower ranks of the armed services, whilst amongst the officer corps, the majority continued to support the Allied cause on the basis of 'better the devil you know'. Even those who did not feel that way, considered that General al-Masri and supporters such as Lieutenant Anwar Sadat went too far by making contact with German intelligence agents. Most, like Lieutenant Gamal Abd al-Nasser, believed it was in Egypt's long-term best interests to help the allies win the war and thus, earn greater influence after the conflict was over. Lieutenant Nasser was sent back to his regiment in Sudan in the summer of 1942. By then, the First Battle of al-Alamain (1 to 27 July 1942) had resulted in a British and Allied success, stopping General Rommel's advance towards Alexandria. It was followed by a prolonged pause until an Allied counter-offensive drove back the German and Italian forces at the Second Battle of al-Alamain (23 October to 11 November 1942).

During the period between these two battles, the British Long Range Desert Group under Lieutenant Colonel Stirling, continued to raid parts of Cyrenaica from the south, using the Kufra oases as their base. However, not all were successful. A raid on Benghazi failed while some others suffered significant losses. Nevertheless, they tied down a significant number of enemy troops, mostly Italians, who might otherwise have been sent towards al-Alamain.

The Sudan Defence Force also carried out raids; one against Jalu Oasis in September almost succeeding before the failure of British operations elsewhere forced its abandonment. In fact, the British persuaded the Egyptian Frontiers Administration to set-up an outpost at Kufra oasis, inside south-eastern Libya. From here and from Dakhla Oasis in Egyptian territory, patrols were sent into the vast Gilf Kibir desert. Meanwhile, both the Italian and the German military commands believed that British units at Kufra were being supplied from Free French territory in what is now Chad. In reality, these supplies were sent across the desert from Wadi Halfa in Sudan on the Nile, just south of the Egyptian frontier.

In response to such long range Allied raids (especially the one against Jalu), the Axis command decided to take control of Siwa. In fact, as the British Army reeled back in the face of Rommel's offensive, orders were given on 27 July for the small British garrison to evacuate Siwa Oasis. Quite who – if anyone – was in charge in Siwa over the next three weeks is unclear. Possibly, it was just a handful of Egyptian policemen.

Shortly before 23 July 1942, some 50 German troops of the Fallschirmjager Kampfgruppe under Major Jakob Burkhard, arrived from Jalu and reported that the British had gone. On the 23rd itself, 30 Junkers Ju 52/3m transport aeroplanes escorted by 19 Messerschmitt Bf.110s arrived with Italian troops. Thereafter, Siwa and its substantial oasis would remain under Italian occupation until 14 November 1942.

In Egypt, the loss of Siwa had an impact on morale and a political affect which was out of all proportion to its military significance. This was because the Egyptian Army had successfully held Siwa Oasis throughout the early part of the North African Campaign before being obliged to hand the area over to the British. Furthermore, the fact that the British then abandoned Siwa without a shot being fired, undermined Egyptian confidence even more. A motorised battalion of the Sudan Defence Force, based at Bahariya alongside Prince Isma'il Da'ud's Mobile Force, subsequently made a counter demonstration against the Italians in Siwa shortly before the Second Battle of al-Alamein but did not press their attack.

Only much later, with General Bernard Montgomery's victory at the Second Battle of al-Alamain, would attitudes really change much. However, most of the Egyptian armed forces came to the conclusion that Britain and her allies, the USA and USSR, would win the Second World War; not the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy and Japan.

Before then and despite the shock of the 'Masri Affair' in which General Aziz al-Masri had attempted to fly to Vichy-controlled Lebanon in a REAF Anson, the REAF continued to have important responsibilities over the Nile Delta, Cairo, the Suez Canal, the town, port and oil facilities of Suez itself. Nevertheless, the head of the British Advisory Mission made it clear to his British superiors that the REAF was now in poor shape, with outdated, worn out equipment and a near catastrophic shortage of spares. While the Axis air threat to the vital naval facilities in and around Alexandria was increasing, the main strategic danger was thought to be to the Suez area where convoys of ships unloaded vital supplies after sailing around Africa. Indeed, this congested area was correctly described as the allies' Achilles' Heel.

Between July and October 1941, vessels which had assembled off the southern entrance to the Suez Canal were attacked 34 times at night by Luftwaffe bombers operating from bases in Greece. British early-warning radar was either unavailable or inadequate so the only possible defence in the air was standing patrols. However, where Egyptian squadrons were concerned, these could only be flown during daylight hours. With a major enemy air threat to both Alexandria, the Suez Canal and the Canal's southern approaches, the British decided to restructure Allied air defences. Instead of the entire Egyptian heartland and Canal Zone being the responsibility of one organisation, No. 250 Wing at Ismailia, which previously consisted of bomber units, was converted to a nominally Signals Wing. In practice, it would be a Fighter Air Defence Wing under Squadron Leader W.F. MacDonald. From 1 July 1941, he and his staff reorganised the air defence of the Canal Zone, initially with the Hurricanes of No. 94 Squadron RAF and the Gladiators of No. 5 Squadron REAF under their control. British sources state that the latter was now commanded by *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Muhammad Hafiz although neither he nor Hassan Mahmud's name appears on the relevant pages of Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid's log-book; he being one of No. 5 Squadron's pilots at this time.

In support of these flying units were three balloon squadrons and four radar stations with sector operations rooms at Suez at the southern end of the Canal and at Fayid which lay approximately one-third the length of the Canal further north. The still rather primitive radar stations were AMES (Air Ministry Experimental Stations) Nos. 204, 219, 254 and 259 while the sector operations rooms were run by Nos. 13 and 17 Wireless Operations Units. There were also substantial numbers of anti-aircraft batteries, largely manned by the Egyptian Army.

In the words of the aviation historian Christopher Shores: 'For the next year or so 250 and 252 Wings were to carry on their own private night war, almost completely divorced from the main operations over the front-line areas of Egypt and Libya'. The numbers of men and aircraft involved were relatively small on both sides but their struggle undoubtedly had considerable strategic significance.

On 1 July, Abu Zaid made two sorties in Gladiator L9030, at 0845 and at 1045. On the night of 5/6 July the Canal area was attacked by seven He.111s of the Luftwaffe's II./KG 26, one aeroplane being lost. Two enemy aeroplanes also dropped bombs near Shaluffa on the 6th, perhaps aiming at No. 5 Squadron's nearby airfield. The following day, Abu Zaid again took off on an unspecified sortie at 1055 in Gladiator L9030. This was repeated the following day at 1105 in Gladiator N5767 on what his log-book simply described as a 'patrol'.

On the night of 9/10 July, Luftwaffe Junkers 88s again attacked Egypt, having previously being trying to support Vichy forces resist the British conquest of Syria and Lebanon. This time, they bombed the RAF airfield at Abu Suwayr. On the following day, 10 July, Abu Zaid took off from Suez in Gladiator L9033 at 0935. There were few pauses in albeit, small-scale conflict with German Junkers attacking Port Said on the night of 11/12th July and reporting ineffectual RAF night fighter attacks. The following day, the Suez Canal was itself targeted by about 20 Axis bombers after which, Axis bombers attacked the Suez area on the night of 13/14 July. The next morning, Abu Zaid's log-book records No. 5 Squadron in the air; he himself flying Gladiator L9033. His last sortie of the month was on the 15th when he trained in 'forced landing practice' in the same aeroplane at 0920.

Since Abu Zaid's log-book is the only REAF document of its type yet available for research, we do not know what other pilots in No. 5 Squadron were doing. Abu Zaid did not fly again for several days. However, on the 16th, a reported 24 Ju 88s of the Luftwaffe's LG 1 carried out their fourth raid in a week, 18 of them attacking ships lying off Suez while the other six bombed Port Tawfiq at the entrance to the Canal. Three days later, there was a change at the top of the RAF's No. 250 Wing which was taken over by Grp. Capt. J.W. Turton-Jones. No. 94 Squadron RAF also got a new leader around the same time, with Wg. Cdr. W.T.F. Wightman handing over to Squadron Leader H.C. Mayers. Meanwhile, the squadron's strength was increased by the arrival of some pilots from the South African Air Force. On 22 July, Suez was again bombed and Abu Zaid's log-book records him taking of at 0835 the following morning in Gladiator N5755.

N5755 was one of a significant number of ex-RAF Gladiator Mk. Is and Mk. IIs that had recently been transferred to the REAF. Twenty-four ex-RAF Gladiators are known to have been handed over although some sources suggest that a total of 27 aeroplanes was actually transferred to the REAF. In addition to N5755, they included serial numbers N5758, N5760, N5762, N5767 and N5771, all of which would feature in Abu Zaid's log-book with the exception of N5760. In addition, N5758 and N5764 appear in Abu Zaid's log-book though they are not mentioned in the above list. Also reportedly transferred were N5875 to N5892 which are said to have been given REAF serials L9030 to L9047. Some of the latter L serial numbers do feature in Abu Zaid's log-book but none of their original RAF numbers do so. Identifying any of the Gladiators used by No. 2 Squadron is much more difficult but they included either L9028 or L9029, L9037 (later transferred to No. 5 Squadron) and others with serial numbers starting with L90–. Such a flood of obsolescent aeroplanes was not entirely welcome and several were subsequently sent back to the RAF.

There was a brief pause before Abu Zaid flew a sortie in Gladiator L9030 at 0925 on 26 July 1941, this being his final mission of the month. The Luftwaffe attacked Suez again the following day, this being repeated on the night of 27/28 by 28 aeroplanes of I./LG 1, followed a short while later, by those of II Gruppe.

In August 1941, with Tobruk under siege by Axis forces while some of General Rommel's troops had also crossed the Libyan frontier into Egypt, the British decided that they needed complete control over all military units in the Western Desert north and west of the Qatarra Depression. Early in the month, they insisted that Siwa Oasis must be defended by British troops and so the Egyptian garrison of Siwa, which currently included an anti-tank battery, field artillery and Bren Gun Carriers, withdrew to Cairo and Jabal Asfar (Khanka) north-east of the Egyptian capital for rest and retraining. In fact, an Aircraft Repair Depot would soon be established there.

Most Egyptian troops were therefore, being withdrawn to Bahariya, supported by a handful of No. 1 Squadron's remaining serviceable Lysanders. Meanwhile, a different Egyptian Light Car Regiment continued to patrol the area south of the vast Qattara Depression between the Bahariya and Siwa oases. An Egyptian Headquarters nevertheless remained at al-Daba'a on the Mediterranean coast about 55kms west of al-Alamain. Also in August 1941, the Egyptian Army took overall responsibility for guarding the Suez Canal, thus releasing more British and Imperial troops for active operations in the Western Desert. Meanwhile Egyptian Frontier Forces continued to patrol the Red Sea coasts. During the summer of 1941, as disillusion spread amongst some junior officers in some REAF squadrons, the British finally told the Egyptian government that Egypt would not be getting its long-awaited, Bristol Blenheim bombers.

Axis air-raids on the Suez Canal and its facilities remained frequent with Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries often being in action and suffering casualties in return. The REAF's No. 5 Squadron's Gladiators at Suez continued their hopeless efforts to confront far superior, night-flying Axis raiders and here, Abu Zaid's log-book again provides the only detailed information yet available for the squadron's activities.

On the first day of August, he flew a 'patrol' in Gladiator N5755, having taken off at 0825. The following day he took off again at 0855, this time in Gladiator L9041. The Suez Canal and Alexandria were now being attacked almost every night although the damage inflicted was less than might have been expected. Unfortunately, there is still no information currently available concerning the activities of No. 2 (Fighter) Squadron which was at this time, at Almaza.

Not that the Axis raiders always escape unscathed. On the night of 3/4 August, a Heinkel He.111 of the Luftwaffe's II./KG 26 failed to return following a raid by a dozen or so bombers on Suez and Port

According to the British Advisory Mission's Report of April 1941, the REAF had thirty-six Miles Magisters. These had taken over the primary training role at the FTS, with only one DH 60M Moth still being mentioned. Here, several REAF flying students and their instructor learn the controls or instrumentation of one of the REAF Magister's during the Second World War. (Albert Grandolini collection)

Said although the reasons seem unknown. On the 4th, Abu Zaid took part in a 'patrol' in Gladiator N5755 which took off at 0915. In the early hours of the following day, 15 enemy aeroplanes attacked the Ismailiya area but one Junkers 88 was caught in searchlights which enabled RAF night fighters to make an effective interception. The damaged Junkers made an emergency ditching in one of the Bitter Lakes after which, its crew were captured. Two other Axis raiders were also brought down by Egyptian anti-aircraft fire.

These attacks became even more frequent from the night of 6/7 August when an estimated 13 Axis bombers attacked Suez while 16 to 25 others attacked Alexandria. This time, RAF night fighters were unable to intercept any of them although one German Ju 88 landed in Turkey after getting lost on its way home; its crew being interned by the Turkish authorities. The following morning Abu Zaid flew his first sortie of the month, taking off at 0925 in Gladiator N5755 on an unspecified mission. On the night of 8/9 August, enemy bombers came over Egypt in two waves to attack both ends of the Suez Canal at Port Said and Suez itself. This time, one of the RAF's South African pilots managed to intercept a Ju 88 south of Ismailia but lost the enemy machine before he could open fire.

Two nights later, the Junkers Ju 88s were back, 11 of them attacking Suez where they claimed to have sunk one ship and to have damaged two more. Two Junkers also bombed the RAF aerodrome at Kabrit while one Junker bombed Ismailiya. After a further two days delay, the Axis bombers were again over northern Egypt and although the RAF's South African pilots intercepted them, none were brought down. While other pilots in No. 5 Squadron seem to have been active, Abu Zaid did not fly again until 19 August when he flew Gladiator L9033. The following day, he went up twice in Miles Magister number L224, which was probably the squadron hack. In the first of these, he was accompanied by *Qa'id Sirb* Muhammad Hafiz, No. 5's new CO. His final sortie of the month was on the 21st on 'patrol' in Gladiator L9041 although the time of his take off was left blank. The end of this page in Abu Zaid's log-book was signed off on 1 September 1941 for the first time, by Muhammad Hafiz as No. 5 Squadron CO.

Enemy raids on Egypt would continue during September 1941. The RAF and REAF defenders were now seriously stretched. However, the British did receive two more radar units, Nos. 261 and 262 AMES. Although attacks on the city of Alexandria eased off, this month would see the first serious attack on Egypt's capital, Cairo. It came on the night of 16/17 September when at least 12 raiders swept in over northern Egypt. Of these, five Ju Ju.88s and one He.111 bombed Abu Qir on the Delta coast east of Alexandria as well as the north-eastern Cairo suburbs of Abbasiya and Gamaliya. The latter was struck between 0208 and 0348 in the morning, killing 39 civilians, injuring 93 others and causing numerous fires. The Gladiators based close-by at Almaza could do nothing as their pilots had not been trained for night interception. Nos. 2 and 5 Squadron again exchanged places, probably during the first part of September with No. 2 Squadron under *Qa'id Asrab* (Squadron Leader) Salah Farid going to Suez and No. 5 under *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Muhammad Hafiz, returning to Almaza.

Meanwhile, four enemy bombers were brought down, mostly by anti-aircraft fire, over the Canal area and Suez during September. Two successful air interceptions were made by RAF fighters on the night of 6/7 September, one of 15 Ju 88s which attacked the aerodrome of the supply base at Abu Suwayr, being brought down.

In the meantime, a reconnaissance He.111 was damaged and had to make a crash landing in the Western Desert on its way home. Furthermore, the Luftwaffe now sent four-engine Focke Wulf FW 200 Condors, some equipped to drop torpedoes, against shipping at the northern end of the Red Sea. One of these attacked vessels in the Gulf of Suez and claimed a hit at 2127 on the night of Saturday 6 September. Having taken off from the Greek mainland at around 1600, this large and very advanced aeroplane probably passed over the Suez area about two hours after sunset (which was at 1910 at Suez on that day), adding yet more to the frustration felt by the Egyptian Gladiator pilots.

On the night of 9/10 September, the Axis enemy was back with bombers of the Luftwaffe's LG 1, attacking Ismailiya and Suez. Sixteen RAF Hurricane night fighters of No. 94 Squadron were sent up, made eight interceptions and six attacks – all of which appear to have been against the same unfortunate Ju 88 which was shot down – although the crew survived to be taken prisoner. Another Ju 88 was damaged by anti-aircraft fire. For their part, the Germans reported being engaged by 13 night fighters as well as the usual strong anti-aircraft fire. Two nights later, the RAF claimed the interception of five enemy bombers, one of which was shot down in the Jabal Ataqa mountains a few kms west of Suez. Meanwhile, the Gladiator pilots of No. 5 Squadron could do nothing but watch.

Nevertheless, Abu Zaid's log-book records him twice taking to the air on 16 September, taking off at 0820 and 1330 in Gladiator N5762; the purpose of the first flight being unspecified while the second was a 'patrol'. By this time, No. 5 Squadron was probably at Almaza attempting to protect Cairo. His next flight was on the 17th in Gladiator L9031, followed by a 'patrol' in Gladiator L9041 at 1045 the following day. Abu Zaid flew twice during the latter part of September, both being 'patrols', taking off at 0950 in Gladiator N5764 on the 23rd and at 1200 in Gladiator L9033 on the 28th.

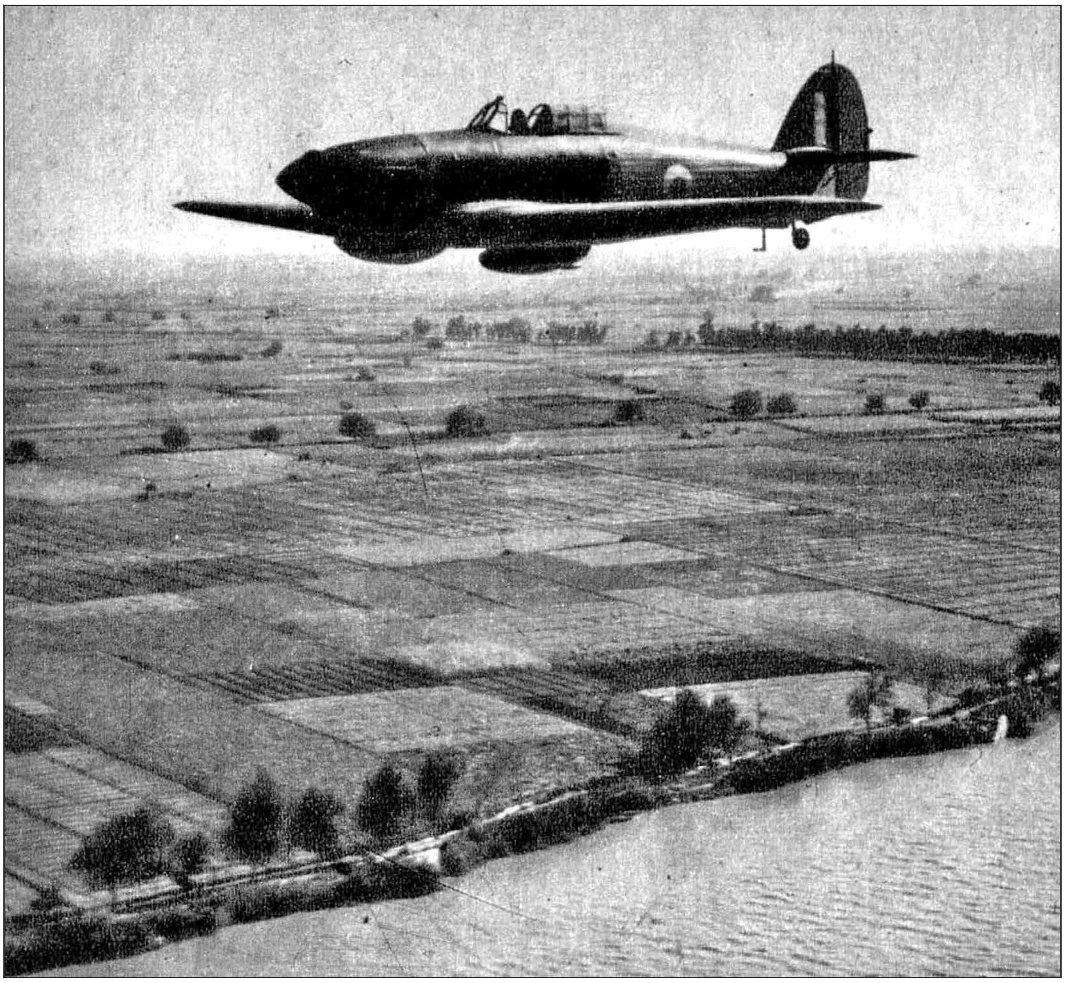
Even against the Italian SM 82s of the 41st *Gruppo* operating from Libya and the Cant *1007 bis* of the 172nd *Squadriglia* in the Aegean, the REAF's Gladiators had been able to do little. Against the night-flying Luftwaffe they could do nothing. However, the replacement of No. 5 Squadron by No. 2 Squadron at Suez perhaps reflected the fact that No. 2 was still considered more experienced at a time when the Suez area had become an absolutely vital area for bringing military supplies into Egypt. The British Eighth Army was preparing for Operation Crusader (which would take place between 18 November and 30 December 1941), to drive Rommel's German and Italian forces out of Egypt and raise the siege of Tobruk. Two new transit camps were also established for the growing number of British and

Allied reinforcements who were coming to Egypt. They were 22 PTC at Almaza and 23 PTC at Hilwan, both on or next to, aerodromes used by the REAF.

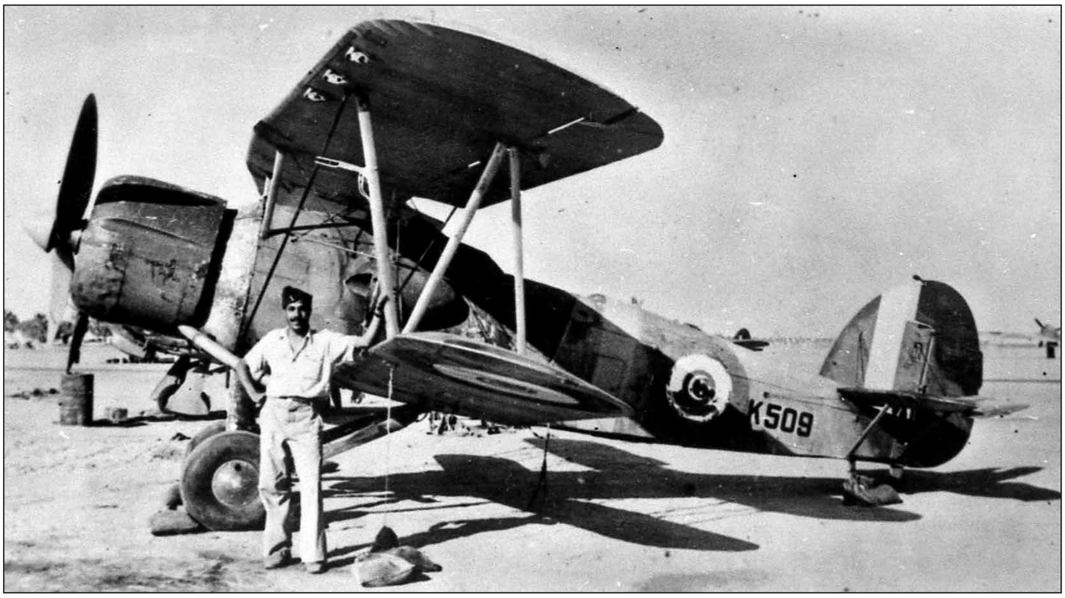
October 27 saw No. 94 Squadron RAF leaving the defence of the Suez Canal area and being sent to a desert airstrip near Sallum, close to the Libyan frontier. Its pilots were not particularly happy about this as they were still flying the relatively old Mk. I Hurricanes they received back in May 1941. Their role at the front was to be ground attack and they would eventually be reequipped with Curtis P 40 Kittyhawks in February 1942. To their REAF colleagues in Nos. 2 and 5 Squadrons, any type of Hawker Hurricane would have been seen as a distinct improvement upon their time-worn Gladiators.

No. 94 Squadron's place at Ismailiya was soon taken by a section of the RAF's No. 213 Squadron which arrived from Cyprus. Meanwhile the enemy only bombed the Suez area five times during October and November. On the other side, the RAF's No. 260 (Balloon) Wing arrived at Ismailia on 2 October. This unit had come by ship from Britain to take over all the barrage balloon defences in Egypt, including those of the existing Nos. 250 and 252 Wings. However, most of these barrage balloon units would subsequently be taken over by the REAF.

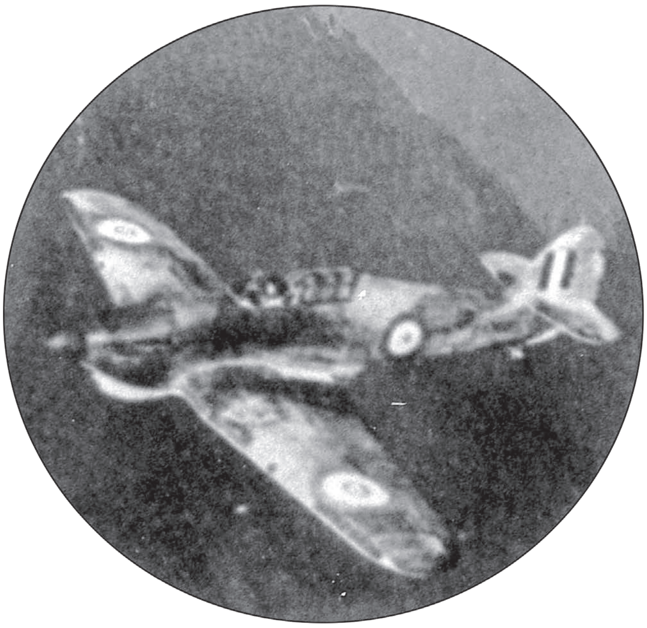
Now based at Almaza, No. 5 Squadron under *Qa'id Sirb* Muhammad Hafiz was still assisted by Squadron Leader Coote of the British Advisory Mission. Whether he was still also helping No. 2 Squadron currently at Suez is unclear, although he probably was. Abu Zaid's duties included three patrols: on 9 October at 0930 in Gladiator N5755 and at 1640 in N5764 or N5767 and on the 10th at 1210 in Gladiator N5764 or N5767. He also flew unspecified sorties in Gladiators, on the 4th at 1040 in L9031, on the 8th at 0930 in L9039 and the 12th or less likely the 28th at 0930 in N5755. Furthermore, he flew Squadron Leader Coote as his passenger in Magister L233 after taking off at 0940 on the 14th. This was described as 'Cross-country from Almaza to 'El Ros', bringing Mr. Coote back'.



The arrival of the first of Egypt's already outdated Hawker Hurricane Mk. I (Trop.) from October 1941 onwards was expected to provide a significant boost to the REAF's effectiveness and morale. They initially formed a Training Flight which would become a new No. 6 Squadron for the defence of Cairo by day and night. They were therefore widely publicized in the Egyptian press, like this example flying low over the irrigated fields of the Nile Delta. (EAF Museum collection)

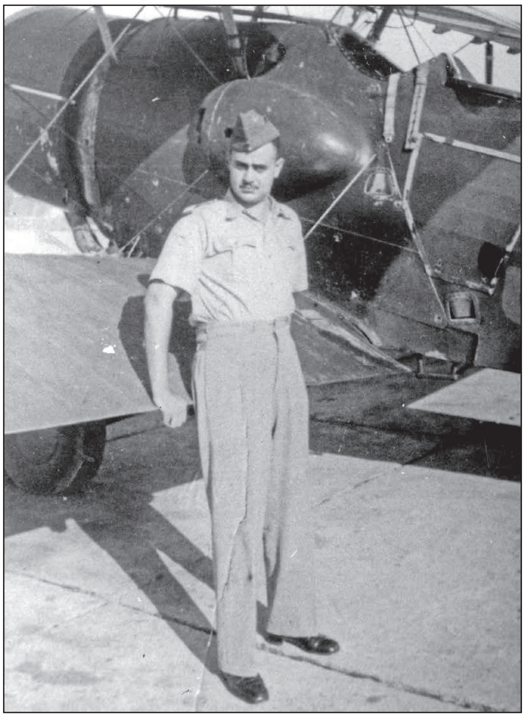


Before the REAF was grounded following two of its Gladiator pilots taking their machines to enemy territory, No. 4 Squadron soldiered on as what was optimistically called a bomber squadron. It was led by Qa'id Sirb (Flight. Lieutenant) Mustafa Mahir who is seen here with one of his unit's Hawker Egyptian Audax (number K509). These, unlike the Audaxes of the FTS which also operated out of Almaza, had been given a standard RAF-style camouflage scheme. Just visible beneath the Audax's nose is one of the REAF's recently acquired Hawker Hurricanes. (J.A. Bagley photograph)



A sadly blurred photograph of one of the REAF's first Hawker Hurricane Mk. I (Trop.) fighters which were allocated to the newly formed No. 6 Squadron These aircraft retained their original RAF serial numbers, three of which are known (Z4387, Z4701 or Z4710, and Z4800). (EAF Museum collection)

El Ros surely cannot have referred to Umm al-Rus on the Red Sea coast, nor the minor location of al-Rus in the desert south-east of Asyut, both of which would have beyond the range of a Miles Magister. Nevertheless, this flight suggests that Coote did indeed have other responsibilities other than that of advising No. 5 Squadron. Abu Zaid again flew Magisters on unspecified sorties on the 25th, taking off at 0930 in L239 and on the 27th taking off at 0820 in L215. Whether these aeroplanes were attached to No. 5 as squadron hacks or were amongst those based at Almaza for other purposes, is unknown.



One of the newly qualified pilots who were posted to No. 4 Squadron was Muhammad Adli Kafafi, who is seen here next to one of the unit's now camouflaged Hawker Egyptian Audaxes. This photograph was one of several which Adli Kafai sent to his fiancée on 18th June 1942 (Kafafi family archive)

It is possible that Abu Zaid was testing the Magisters in question, as the REAF's Flying Training School at nearby Khanka was still having technical problems with these aeroplanes. Limitations on their carburettor systems had been delaying aerobatics training for the cadets and it is likely that important maintenance work and certainly any significant modifications, would have been undertaken by the REAF's main engineering unit at Almaza. Amongst those tasked with tackling such problems was *Tayyar Muhandis* (Pilot Engineer) Abd al-Hamid Mahmud who would become one of most important aero-engineers in the history of the Egyptian Air Force. Having graduated from the Faculty of Engineering of the Department of Aviation Mechanics in 1941, Abd al-Hamid Mahmud was steadily promoted until he was appointed the EAF's Chief Engineer in 1959, thereafter remaining in this position and reaching the rank of *Qa'id Liwa* (Major-General) in 1965. After resigning from the Air Force, Abd al-Hamid Mahmud was made Chairman of the Air Arabia Foundation in May 1971.

Unfortunately, *Tayyar Muhandis* Abd al-Hamid Mahmud graduated around the same time as the REAF's Flying Training School suffered a highly visible tragedy. This occurred during a fly-past to celebrate the graduation of a new cadre of pilots in November 1941, the largest such cadre yet to achieve their REAF wings. It was movingly described by Munira Kafafi in her biography of her father, Adli Kafafi:

> On the day of the graduation … laughter and groans, smiles and tears were mixed together. Death and life were joined that day … While all eyes were looking to the sky, searching for the new eagles who were to demonstrate their flying skills. Suddenly one aeroplane burst into flames and came down in the middle of the field of celebration. Its pilot was Tayyar Thani [Pilot Officer] Shukry Hashad, a brother of Muhammed Nabih Hashad … Shukry Hashad was one of the six police officers who had decided to abandon their safe life [in the Egyptian Police] and join the Flying Training School'.

The other photograph which Adli Kafai sent to his fiancée on the same day showed him climbing aboard one of No. 4 Squadron's Egyptian Audaxes. (Kafafi family archive)

Adli Kafafi and some of his colleagues of No. 4 Squadron in Egypt's Western Desert during the Second World War. (Kafafi family archive)

Not all the photographs which Adli Kafafi sent to his fiancée on 28th June 1942 show him with an aeroplane. Here the Pilot Officer appears in a much more relaxed mood. (Kafafi family archive)

Whether this accident had anything to do with the ongoing problems with the Miles Magisters' carburettor system is unknown but some Egyptian Members of Parliament again demanded an enquiry into what they described as, 'British training methods and training aeroplanes'. In fact, a subsequent enquiry vindicated both the methods and the machines but the tragedy nevertheless added to already existing tension and mistrust.

Shukry Hashad's brother, *Tayyar Awal* Nabih Hashad, was currently serving in No. 3 Squadron at Almaza and may well have witnessed his sibling's death. It remains unclear whether there was an intake of flying cadets in late 1941 or early 1942 and any such course would have been interrupted when the FTS was temporarily closed following the crisis of 1942 (see below).

Little information is available concerning those of the REAF's squadrons which were not fighters. However, it is likely that No. 1 Squadron's few remaining operational Lysanders were still flying in support of the Egyptian Army in the desert south of the Qatarra Depression. It was in this area, near the Bahariya Oasis, that a Wellington bomber of the RAF's No. 38 Squadron ran out of fuel after getting lost while returning from a raid against Dirna and Bardia in Libya. The crew had to bale out and were very lucky to be found the following day by a motorised unit of the Egyptian Army. The latter may have been helped by one of the Lysanders which patrolled this area.

It was a part of Egypt which had largely escaped the direct impact of the war but on 12 November, three or four enemy aircraft bombed the Fayyum district at around 1732, hitting a mosque and eight houses, causing 64 deaths and nearly 100 other casualties. The closest defending aircraft were apparently No. 5 Squadron REAF at Almaza but even they were too far from the scene of the raid to intercept any of the attackers.

Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid did not fly during November but the following month his log-book shows him to have been serving as the leader of No. 5 Squadron's B Flight, so perhaps he had been on a training course.

No. 2 Squadron was now responsible for the defence of Suez and the southern part of the Canal during daylight hours. However, the defence of the Canal area as a whole would be considerably strengthened by the arrival of the newly formed No. 89 Squadron RAF. An advance party arrived at Abu Suwayr on 27 November and was soon followed by the rest of the squadron. This unit flew potent radar-equipped Bristol Beaufighter II night fighters. They were clearly needed, for Italian bombers based in Libya had again been dropping mines into the Suez Canal.

In contrast, the last air attack against Allied shipping in the northern Red Sea was on 4 November. This was largely because Operation Crusader had managed to push Axis forces back into central and western Libya. The only enemy aeroplanes now seen were high-flying reconnaissance machines which were way beyond the interception capabilities of the REAF's old Gladiators. Not until the following March 1942, with Rommel's devastating advance across the Western Desert, would there be any further attack on the Suez Canal.

The only available information concerning the other Squadrons based at Almaza provides a few names. Namely that *Tayyar Awal* Nabih Hashad and Sa'ad al-Din Sharif were currently part of No. 3 Squadron, while Shafiq Hasib and Adli Kafafi were flying with No. 4 Squadron There was no mention of No. 6 Squadron which had presumably not yet been officially formed although its first pilots were preparing to receive their already outdated Hurricane Mk. Is.

December 1941 saw No. 2 Squadron still at Suez and No. 5 at Almaza. Neither was particularly busy and No. 89 Squadron RAF at Abu Suwayr which reached fully operational status on the 10th of the month, had to wait until 7 February the following year before its first scramble against enemy intruders. For his part, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid flew Gladiator L9041 on an unspecified sortie on December 8, having taken off at 0830. He remained on the ground until the 20th when he took to the air twice. One take off was at 0830 on an unspecified mission in Gladiator N5755. The other was for a 'Patrol' in Gladiator L9037. However, the time of his take off was left blank and the entry in his log-book was inserted out of sequence after his first sortie of 1942. Perhaps it was a hurried emergency or was so unimportant that the pilot forgot to note it down.

On the 22nd, Abu Zaid again flew twice on unspecified missions in Gladiators L9031 at 0700 and L9041 at 1120. One flight on 25 December taking off at 0840 in Gladiator L9031 for an unspecified reason, was followed by no less than four flights on the following day, the 26th. The first was at 0841 in Gladiator L9041 for an unspecified reason, the second in the same machine at 1130 for a 'Patrol', the third in Gladiator N5787, supposedly at 0700 and thus inserted out of sequence, again for an unspecified reason, while the fourth was at 1440 in Gladiator L9033 for an unspecified reason. Abu Zaid's final flights in 1941 were on the 28th (though the date of the last flight of all was written – presumably mistakenly – as the 26th). Both were in the morning in Gladiator N5767 at 0700 and 0720 for unspecified reasons although the timing might suggest that either or both flights might simply have been to test the aeroplane.

The last page of *Tayyar Awal* (Pilot Officer) Abu Zaid's log-book for the year 1941 was also signed off as correct only by himself as CO of B Flight. This might indicate that *Qa'id Sirb* Muhammad Hafiz, the CO of No. 5 Squadron was not available at the time.

When the REAF at last received the first four of its promised seven Hurricanes Mk Is, these initially formed a Training Flight in October 1941 with some Mk. IIs due to follow. In fact, this Training Flight was the start of a completely new REAF No. 6 Fighter Squadron whose primary responsibility would be the defence of Cairo by night and by day. The morale of the fighter squadrons immediately began to improve in anticipation of flying relatively modern machines which would at least give them a chance of intercepting high-speed Italian and German bombers. Not surprisingly perhaps, Egypt's first monoplane fighters were given suitable publicity in the Egyptian press and subsequently appeared on a commemorative postcard celebrating the tenth anniversary of the formation of the Egyptian Air Force.

On 21 January 1942, General Erwin Rommel launched a full-scale counter-offensive in North Africa, retaking Benghazi in eastern Libya from the British and their allies, eight days later. This was followed by a series of what can only be called, major defeats of the British who withdrew, sometimes in good order, sometimes clearly not in good order, to a new defensive line close to the village and railway station of al-Alamain. This lay on Egypt's Mediterranean coast, west of Alexandria. Here, they halted to make a stand in July 1942. It was an obvious place for the British and their allies to establish a strong defensive position. The Mediterranean Sea to the north was dominated by the British Royal Navy and the impassable Qatarra Depression lay to the south. Here, these two strategic barriers lay closer together than anywhere else.

Thus the 'Alamain lines' were, in fact, like a gate between two walls. To their west lay broadening areas of relatively flat desert across which the German and Italian forces had advanced, extending their supply lines and communications as they did so. However, to the east, the desert opened out again and led directly to Alexandria, the Nile Delta, Cairo and the Nile Valley. If the gate closed by British defensive lines near al-Alamain could be forced open, Egypt would be Rommel's for the taking.

Given the course of the war from January until July, the majority of people in Egypt quite understandably believed that Rommel would succeed. Indeed, many in both the political and military leaderships started to think of how best to defend their country's interests in the light of this expected Axis victory. Many in the British diplomatic corps also seem to have expected Rommel to march into Cairo whilst even the British and Allied military leadership were making contingency plans for such an eventuality. Put simply, panic was not far beneath the surface in Cairo; this would euphemistically be called 'The Flap' in later British accounts. The Germans and their Axis allies also appeared to be unstoppable on the Eastern Front against the Soviet Union whilst far away in south-east Asia and the Pacific, Japanese conquests were similarly reaching their high-water mark.

Back in Egypt, there were those who saw this crisis as a potential opportunity. Even the recently installed pro-British Egyptian Prime Minister, in his speech to parliament on 21 April 1942, stated that while Egypt would remain Britain's friend and ally, Egyptian troops would only fight in self-defence. This left the REAF in the same peculiar position it had occupied for months. Egypt remained officially at peace with the Axis powers at the same time that German and Italian bombers were regularly attacking targets in Egypt – not only 'British targets in Egypt' but targets, military and civilian, that could only be described as Egyptian.

Meanwhile, the REAF remained responsible for the defence of the Suez area (the Suez airfield at Shaluffa being an entirely REAF base by 1942), the Gulf of Suez and the southern part of the Suez Canal. In some areas, they were supported by RAF units as well as the city of Cairo by day and in the near future, by night. In practice however, these targets were hardly ever threatened by day, only by night which remained as yet, an RAF responsibility. On the ground, Egyptian Army anti-aircraft gunners and searchlight crews were in constant action in defence of Alexandria, Cairo, along the Suez Canal and some other places throughout this period.

There is no denying that the Egyptian officer corps was deeply divided in its attitudes during the looming crisis. The existence of anti-British sentiment in the Egyptian armed forces was generally known but its strength and depth remained a mystery to both the Egyptian and the British authorities. Generally speaking, the older officers who had been educated in the 1920s and early 1930s tended to be more pro-British – out of habit if nothing else – while the younger officers were more likely to have been influenced by a disparate range of ultra-nationalist or fundamentalist Islamic ideologies. Some degree of mystery also surrounded the attitude of the Egyptian government towards these various strands of political activity in the Army and Air Force.

No historians appear to have attempted to work out what proportion remained firmly pro-British, what proportion looked forward to Rommel's victory with enthusiasm and what proportion remained uncertain, confused or simply resigned to whatever might happen. The authors believe that the first two views were in a minority, while the third probably reflected the attitude of most. There also seems to have been a degree of fatalism in the officer corps, as in the educated and more cosmopolitan sections of Egyptian society as a whole, reflecting a widespread acceptance of the fact that even elite, Europeanised and wealthy Egyptian families had little if any control over the fate of their own country. This in turn led to the carefree, seemingly irresponsible, 'make hay while the sun shines' attitude which more serious, or perhaps more desperate, British observers found distasteful amongst those they criticised as the 'Levantine' classes of Cairo society. Here, it is perhaps worth noting that there was no firm link between political activism in the Egyptian officer corps during the 1940s and supposedly 'pure' Egyptian ethnic background. Several future Free Officer revolutionaries had substantially non-Egyptian ancestry, some largely Turkish or what the British arrogantly dismissed as, 'Levantine'.

Despite military events over the horizon in the Western Desert, life could be good in Cairo, at least for those with money. According to G.W. Houghton, an RAF pilot who served in Egypt at this time, during the spring of 1942, Cairo was one of the most expensive cities in the world, comparable to Switzerland. Yet it could also offer a wide array of 'comforts' for men on leave or in the case of RAF units based within the Egyptian heartland, those with enough money for a taxi-fare.

There had always been those in the REAF who, perhaps inspired by Victor Hubert Tait's initial insistence on sport as an essential part of Egyptian Air Force life, took this to an extreme and seemingly took as much interest in their sporting life as they did in their air force duties. One such may have been *Tayyar Awal* Adli al-Shafa'i who was the tennis champion of Egypt from 1942 to 1952 whilst also having a successful career in the REAF. It is interesting to note that Prince Isma'il Halim of the Egyptian Royal Family was President of the Egyptian Tennis Federation at the time Adli Shafa'i was serving in the REAF. He similarly divided his enthusiasm between tennis and his support for the Egyptian Air Force. Adli subsequently became President of the Tennis Federation a few years after Prince Halim retired. In fact, from the mid-1960s onwards, his son Isma'il (who was born in November 1947 and whom the author interviewed in Cairo) represented his country on the tennis court whilst Adli's grandson, again named Adli, did the same.

In complete contrast to those who were determined to carry on with Cairo's traditional high life, some of the right wing ultranationalists in the Egyptian officer corps now felt a need to make a choice. They had to choose between taking up arms against those they regarded as Egyptian traitors and British 'occupiers' or to try and form a political alliance with the religiously motivated nationalists of the Muslim Brotherhood. Some sought an accommodation with as many 'patriots' of all shades of opinion as possible, including previously derided 'moderates', as well as seeking younger patriots amongst university student leaders.

The Muslim Brotherhood was keen to build-up a 'patriotic coalition' in the belief that the Brotherhood would dominate any such association. At one point, Hassan al-Banna, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, claimed to have almost a quarter of a million members which was probably an exaggeration. He also sought to flatter the military men by saying that he needed their leadership and organisational skills. According to Tewfik Aclimandos, the Muslim Brotherhood attempted – but failed – to do this with the mixed Army and Air Force group led by Abd al-Latif Baghdadi and Anwar Sadat.

These officers and most of their associates had already been warned by General Aziz al-Masri, whom their regarded as their political mentor, that the Brotherhood's 'Supreme Guide' Hassan al-Banna, had a hidden agenda – namely to make Egypt into a fundamentalist Islamic state. In practice, they had already found Hassan al-Banna difficult to negotiate with because the Supreme Guide tended to give evasive answers to their questions while at the same time, demanding their unquestioning obedience. It was a clash of political styles which would persist to the present day.

Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood already had an enthusiastic adherent within the REAF's officer corps; namely Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf. He, having been arrested for his role in General al-Masri's attempt to fly out of the country, had recently been released from jail by the new Egyptian government in an attempt to placate ultranationalists in the officer corps. Abd al-Ra'uf had nevertheless, been transferred from the REAF to the Army as a continuing disciplinary measure. During part of his time in the Army, he is said to have procured weapons and ammunition for the Muslim Brotherhood while stationed at Ras Sudr in Sinai.

British intelligence services meanwhile identified yet another semi-secret grouping within the officer corps which they believed to have links with Turkey. In fact, this small group were royalist in their sympathies and like the Royal Palace itself, reflected the Egyptian Army's previous Ottoman origins. Within the REAF, British intelligence included the names of the most active as Haqqi Harun who was thought to lead the REAF group, Ahmad Sa'id al-Shalabi, Hassan Aqif and Muhammad Abd al-Mun'im Ahmad. Less active members were listed as Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia, Ibrahim Hassan Gazerine, Sa'id Ali Zaytun, Kamal al-Din Hamada, Ahmad Shawqi, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid, Muhammad Abd al-Halim Khalifah, Midhat Muhammad Qasdi and Muhammad Sabri Sharabah. The British were, however, wrong in regarding this group as a potential source of sabotage rather than political activism.

In fact, the currently most active and potentially dangerous from the British point of view, was the group led by Abd al-Latif Baghdadi, Wajih Abaza, Hassan Izzat and Anwar Sadat. The first three, as junior REAF officer pilots, shared a flat in Heliopolis close to Almaza aerodrome, along with another pilot, Ahmad Sa'udi Hussein Abu Ali. As Baghdadi later wrote in 1952: 'We were familiar friends and there was trust between us, as well as a unity of views. Enthusiasm and youthful patriotism dominated all our conversations'.

Anwar Sadat was an Army officer but this group or cell largely consisted of men from the REAF and numbered between 16 and 25 altogether. If the higher figure is correct, then it is an impressive sum, consisting of a significant minority of the Air Force's officer corps. They usually met in a private house in the Zaitun suburb Cairo, close to Heliopolis or in cafes around the Egyptian capital. They would also meet in the house of the retired General Aziz al-Masri, who remained a hero as well as something of a political guide for the young officers.

Still essentially Royalist in their sympathies, they had been infuriated by the British humiliation of King Faruq to whom they had all sworn their oaths of allegiance as officers in the so-called 'Abdin Palace Incident' on 2 February 1942 (see below). Now, seeing the British retreat towards al-Alamain as an opportunity, this group began planning acts of anti-British sabotage. Some of them also tried to recruit supporters and potential saboteurs amongst students from the prestigious Khedive Fu'ad al-Awwal and Sa'idiyya secondary schools.

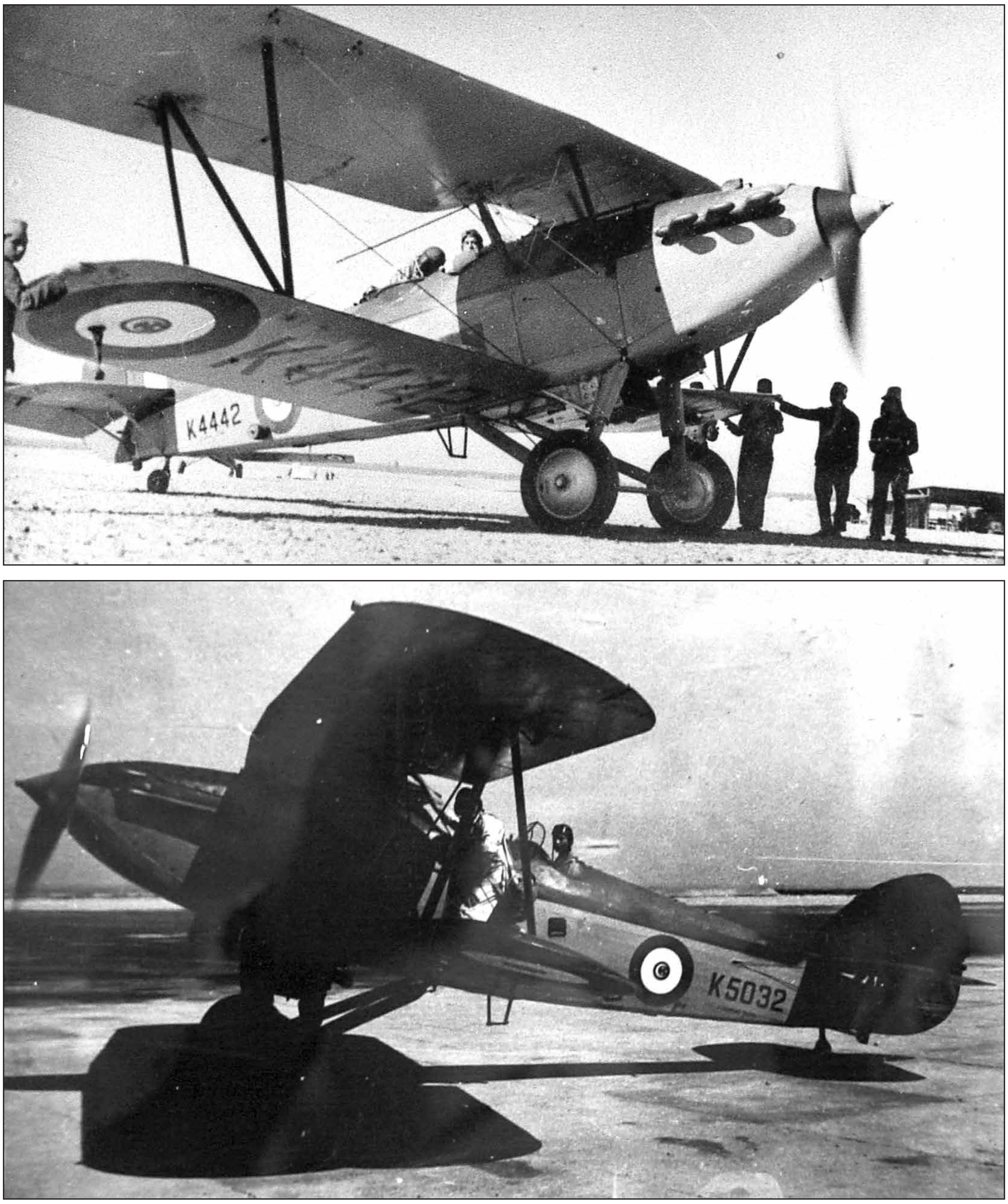
According to Abd al-Latif Baghdadi, their organisation consisted of a number of cells, each consisting of five officers. Each member was tasked with recruiting five others, thus forming a new cell. The members of one cell did not know the names of the other cells while a cell's leader only knew those who were members of his own and his previous cell – and so on up to the leadership of the group. How far they got in this process remains unknown but the group's confidentiality was such that British intelligence was barely aware of its existence.

This was in contrast to other groups about which both the British and Egyptian security services knew a great deal. Each member paid a small monthly contribution to fund the group's activities and to purchase materials to make crude weapons such as Molotov Cocktails. According to the Baghdadi, they even purchased electric-powered metalworking lathes for the manufacture of more sophisticated weapons in safe locations within Cairo, sometimes using raw materials stolen from Egyptian Army or REAF stores.

It would also be this Baghdadi-Sadat group which caused the biggest political shock in the RAF in 1942. Hassan Izzat appears to have been the one to have first put forward the name of Anwar Sadat and thereby, to expand this originally Air Force group's leadership, into the Egyptian Army. Having members or sympathisers in the Army greatly increased the scope for potential anti-British sabotage or intelligence gathering. In fact, very little was achieved in practical terms and when something dramatic was eventually undertaken, the reaction of the British and Egyptian Intelligence security services was so swift and ruthless that the campaign of active 'resistance' ended abruptly.

Even more significant was General Montgomery's defeat of Rommel at the First and Second Battles of al-Alamain which entirely changed the military and political situation. Looking back on this period in later years, Abd al-Latif Baghdadi described himself and his group as naive and nationalistic but in no way pro-Nazi.

The only really successful act of sabotage carried out by the group was when one of its Army members, *Mulazim* Magdi Hasanain,



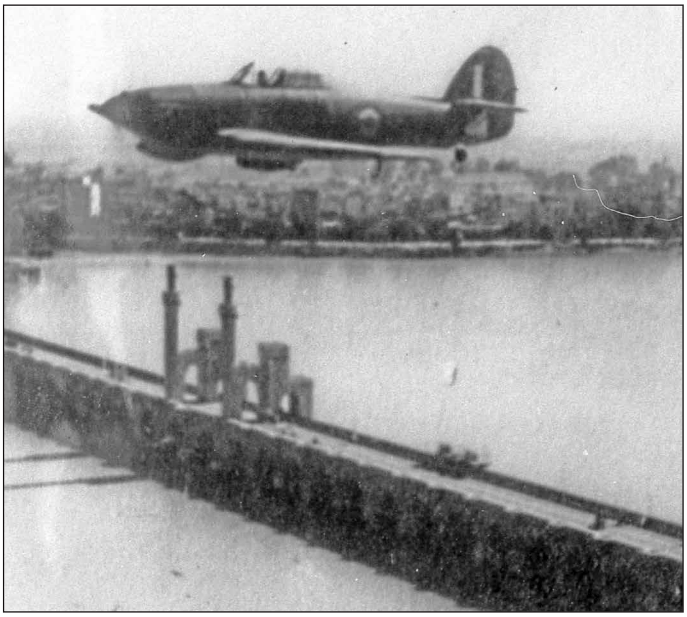
The significant number of Hawker Hart Trainers acquired by the REAF around 1942 were allocated to several squadrons. These included No. 4 (Bomb.) as training aircraft, No. 6 (Fight.) probably as squadron hacks, and to the FTS for its Advanced Training Flight. Which unit numbers K4442 and K5032 belonged to is unknown, though both appear to be painted as trainers. (Ibrahim Gazerine collection)

hijacked some Free French lorries loaded with explosives, detonators and hand grenades. This is likely to have happened in the Western Desert, south of the Qatarra Depression which was an Egyptian Army area of responsibility. The French lorries that were stolen may have been from the Free French Division at the southern end of the Allied line. It is more likely they were on their way to Free French force under General Philippe Leclerc de Hauteclocque which had crossed the Sahara from French West Africa to seize Kufra from the Italians in February 1941. The weapons were then passed to Hassan Izzat of the REAF who got them back to Cairo where they were hidden. Some were reportedly used against the British in the Canal Zone in the early 1950s.

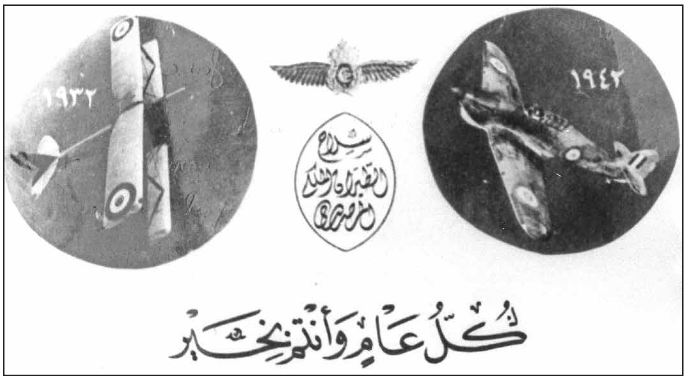
Baghdadi and his colleagues concentrated on gathering information about British supply dumps and communications which they then intended to pass on to the Germans as a sign of goodwill before Rommel's anticipated victory. Gamal Abd al-Nasser may already have had links with the Baghdadi-Sadat group although not yet as a full member because there is no evidence that Nasser was as yet, involved in active subversion still less in active sabotage. Other REAF officers who were probably full members of the group were Ahmad Sa'udi, Hassan Ibrahim and Gamal Salim, suggesting that individuals could be involved with more than one group at a time. The same also applied to Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf who was still in the Army as a disciplinary measure.

Despite the dramatic events in the Western Desert, the work of the REAF's squadrons appeared to continue much as usual. Officers from the administrative and technical sections such as Hassan Tawfiq continued to make occasional flights in Miles Magisters at Almaza in order to maintain their flying hours. The fighter squadrons again swapped aerodromes, with No. 2 returning to Almaza and No. 5 going to Suez. This may have taken place on 4 January when Abd al-Hamid's log-book recorded a cross-country flight from Almaza to Suez. Prior to that, he had taken up Gladiator N5758 on January 1, perhaps on a test flight. At the time, Abu Zaid was CO of B Flight. Next came another flight on 3 January in Gladiator N5767, the same aeroplane which he flew to Suez on the 4th having taken off at 0950.

The rest of January 1942 was quite busy for Abu Zaid at Suez with two sorties in Gladiators N5767 and N5755 on the 6th, taking off at 0700 and 0920 respectively. In the 10th he flew once in Gladiator L9033, taking off at 1545; once again on the 11th in Gladiator L9041 on 'Patrol', taking off at 1040; once again on the 12th in Gladiator N5767 taking off at 1130; once on the 13th in the same Gladiator taking off at 1135; twice on the 14th in L9041 on 'Patrol' taking off at 1135, then again in L9033 taking off at 1345; on the 15th in Gladiator L9031 taking off at 0830. There was then a pause until Abu Zaid flew again on the 19th, again in Gladiator L9031 taking off at 0830. Then another pause until the 19th when he flew L9031, taking off at 0905. On the 20th he flew twice, first in Gladiator N5755 at 0950 then taking off again at 1045 in Miles Magister L219. On the 21st, he took off at 0920 in L9033 and again the following day at 0830 in the same aeroplane. At 1235 on 22 January, Abu Zaid took to the air for the second time for a 'Patrol' in Gladiator N5758. There was then another pause until the 25th when Abu Zaid took up Gladiator N5764 at 0835, followed by a take off at 0945 on the 27th in Gladiator N5755. His final two flights of January



Another example of the publicity given to the REAF's first handful of Hawker Hurricanes is this photograph, showing one of them roaring over the historic old Nile Barrage north of Cairo which was then only being used as a road bridge. (Kafafi family collection)



Ironically 1942, the year in which the Egyptian Air Force celebrated its tenth anniversary, was also seen as a year of humiliation when the REAF was grounded on the insistence of the British. Nevertheless, this commemorative postcard had already been produced, showing one of the EAAF's first De Havilland DH 60M Moths and one of the REAF's latest Hawker Hurricanes. (Kafafi family collection)

1942 were both on the 28th, taking off at 0910 in N5771 and then at 1105 in L9034, the last entry in his log-book being signed off by *Qa'id Sirb* M. Hafiz, the CO of No. 5 Squadron

The REAF's almost time-expired Gloster Gladiators were not the only examples to still be flying in Egypt. The RAF's No. 1411 Meteorological Flight had been established at Heliopolis at the start of January 1942 under Squadron Leader W.C. Williams. He would be succeeded by Flight Lieutenant A. Beatty on 29 June 1942. After the crisis and grounding of the REAF later in the summer of 1942, followed by its subsequent rehabilitation, No. 1411 (Meteorological Flight) would be handed over to the REAF to be entirely manned and operated by Egyptian personnel although officially remaining an RAF unit.

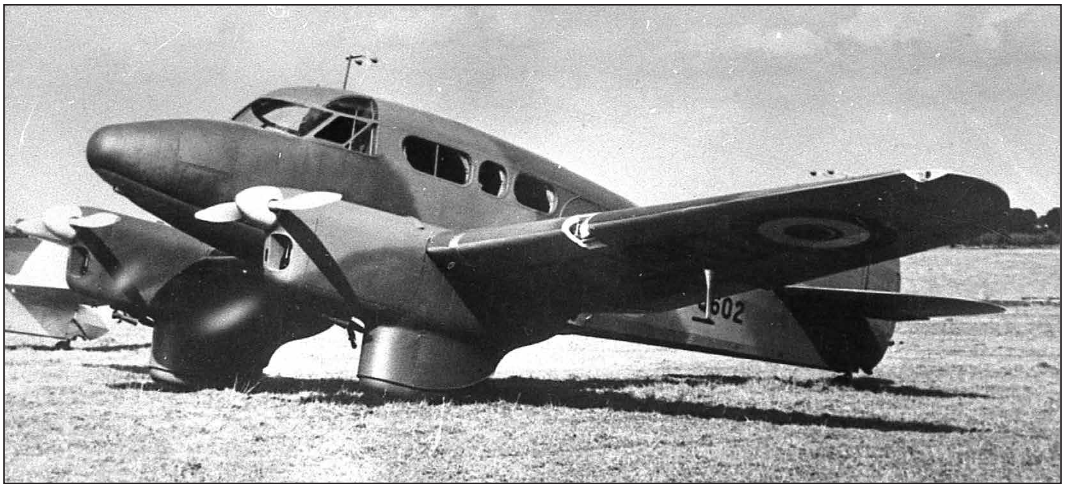
The REAF's newly formed No. 6 (Fighter) Squadron with Hurricanes was given responsibility for the air defence of Alexandria from early 1942, perhaps as early as January and would remain responsible for it until January 1943 which suggests that, when the REAF's crisis and grounding occurred in June 1942, No. 6 was only grounded for a brief period.

Little tends to be heard of Egyptian civil aviation during this period but around 1942 two Waco light aircraft of the Royal Egyptian Aero Club were commandeered by the British for use by the British Long Range Desert Group. One of them is believed to have been civil registration SU-AAL which reportedly became AX695 of the RAF while the other may have been Waco ZGC-7 SU-AAV which was taken over by the RAF as AX697. What is less clear is when these aeroplanes were returned to their civil registrations and appeared in a number of photographs taken shortly before or shortly after, the end of the Second World War.

As already stated above, few events of 1942 highlight both the tensions and the way in which various sides reacted to them than King Faruq's dismissal of Prime Minister Husain Sirry on 4 February 1942. Just under a month earlier, the British ambassador in Cairo had demanded that Husain Sirry Pasha suspend diplomatic relations with the Vichy government of France. This Sirry did but without informing King Faruq, who was currently on a tour of inspection in the Eastern Desert region between the Nile and the Red Sea. On his return to Cairo, the King accused Sirry Pasha's Foreign Minister Salih Sami Pasha, of acting beyond his authority resulting in Sami's resignation, closely followed by that of his colleague the Finance Minister. Unable to find suitable successors, Prime Minister Sirry felt his own authority had been undermined.

Another version of this affair maintains that King Faruq demanded the dismissal of the Foreign Minister but as the decision had been taken by Hussain Sirry himself, the Prime Minister resigned rather than make his Foreign Minister a scapegoat. What is clear is that the King certainly sought to take political advantage of this situation which in turn infuriated the British ambassador who was accustomed to manipulating matters to Britain's advantage.

One of the Egyptian Army's mobile anti-aircraft battery under training during the Second World War. (Albert Grandolini collection)



One of the REAF Royal Flight's Percival Q6s (number Q602), probably photographed in the United Kingdom. (Author's collection)

While this was going on, Fred Weston of the Advisory Mission found himself caught up in another episode concerning the Percival Q6s. Both had been sent to Luxor for King Faruq who was, or was soon to set out on, his inspection tour of the Eastern Desert and Red Sea coast. One of the Q6s was obliged to land in the desert with engine trouble about 160kms south of Cairo. The pilot sent a radio message explaining his predicament so a British pilot attached as an advisor to the REAF, flew Fred Weston to help him. After looking at the Q6, Weston found a problem with one of the engine cylinders but decided he could repair it. The British pilot flew back to Cairo for the necessary spares and another aeroplane was sent to the King. However, Faruq insisted on an all Egyptian enquiry which subsequently made a report which criticised British aircraft and the British Advisory Mission.

In response, the British complained that this report had been unfair and insisted on another joint report by both British and Egyptian officers. This concluded that the problem was caused by lubricating oil draining to the rear of the engine when the aeroplane stood idle for a long time and that the accident had therefore, been the result of poor maintenance. Whether *Qai'd Sirb* Ibrahim Gazerine's previous fitting of non-standard oil coolers to the Percival Q6s to deal with the problems caused by Egypt's hot and dusty conditions also contributed to the problem, is unclear.

It was not long after this affair that Fred Weston was told by his British superiors that he could not renew his contract with the REAF because he was more urgently needed elsewhere. Nevertheless, his analysis of the technical problem of the Percival Q6 subsequently helped Weston get a commission as an RAF officer. Having lost one of its most skilled and experienced technical advisors, the Egyptian Air Force now found that it could obtain virtually no spare parts for its British-made aeroplanes. These were also urgently needed by the RAF in Egypt as it struggled to combat both the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica. Furthermore, the spares situation for both the RAF and the REAF was made particularly serious in early 1942 because Axis bombing virtually destroyed the RAF's main Technical Depot at Ismailiya.

Two days after King Faruq's dismissal of Husain Sirry Pasha as his Prime Minister, the politically catastrophic Abdin Palace Incident occurred: the first major political crisis in Egypt since the start of the war. Sirry's dismissal caused consternation to the British at a moment when things going very badly for the allies in the Western Desert. Fearing that the King might again ask Ali Mahir to take over as Prime Minister, the British government insisted that Faruq install Nahas Pasha instead. This demand was delivered to the Egyptian Palace by Britain's powerful ambassador in Cairo, Sir Miles Lampson. Mustafa Nahas, although a committed Egyptian nationalist, was a known quantity for the British who believed that Nahas would be a steadying factor at this tense time.

With recent student demonstrations having come onto the streets of major Egyptian cities in support of Ali Mahir, King Faruq resisted Ambassador Lampson's demands. The King also summoned his closest advisors and leaders of major political parties to the Abdin Palace on 4 February. There, Faruq hoped to get these men to agree to form a coalition government of national unity. Unfortunately, they were still in consultation when another message came from Ambassador Lampson warning that if the King did not accept the British request by six o'clock that evening, the British would take unilateral action. The well-known explorer and avowedly pro-British Hasanain Pasha was currently King Faruq's 'chef du cabinet' or head of the monarch's inner core of advisors. After some deliberation, he was given the task of taking King Faruq's response to Sir Miles Lampson. In it, Faruq declined the British demand and requested more time to discuss the matter with his advisors. Supposedly, Lampson retorted to Hasanain Pasha: 'You shall have my answer at nine o'clock. I may come, or perhaps something else will happen'.

Most of the Egyptian politicians then left the Abdin Palace and went home, having agreed to return at nine o'clock. Between seven and eight in the evening they were informed that British tanks had surrounded King Faruq's Abdin Palace. Other British troops had blocked the route between the Palace and the Almaza barracks and aerodrome where most of the available Egyptian troops and aeroplanes were stationed. At this point, Hasanain Pasha persuaded King Faruq to be more flexible and to appoint a Wafd Party government with Nahas Pasha at its head. Furthermore, Nahas should be free to choose his own government ministers without interference from the Palace.

By the end of 4 February, the fig-leaf of Egypt's supposed independence had been torn away and the country stood nakedly subservient to the British Empire. King Faruq had been publicly humiliated. Most of the population of Egypt were appalled and within the Egyptian officer corps, the shock was even greater. They felt side-lined and dishonoured, having been unable to do anything to save their King from humiliation. In fact, reverberations from the Abdin Palace Affair of 4 February 1942 would continue to be felt at least until Colonel Nasser's coup of 1952 and in some respects, much longer.

Things would soon be made even worse by British insistence on a purging of the Egyptian armed forces following the Abdin Palace Affair. On the other hand, there were some in the British Foreign Office, diplomatic corps and even in the British armed services who feared that Sir Miles Lampson's ruthless action – understandable as it might have been in the military crisis of early 1942 – would encourage even greater anti-British feeling in Egypt, especially in the Egyptian armed forces. The Egyptian Army, Air Force and armed Coastguard might have been small in terms of numbers and military effectiveness but they remained largely responsible for maintaining internal security. Furthermore, they played a significant role in the air defence of key areas including Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and parts of the Suez Canal.

The feeling of humiliation was just as strong in the REAF as it was in the Egyptian Army but here, it appears that there were more men who were willing to take action. For example, Abd al-Latif Baghdadi and his group met at one of their supporter's apartments on the Nile island and prosperous quarter of Zamalik. Their initial motivation was to do something to demonstrate their loyalty to their King, whose popularity had actually increased as a result of the crisis with many people seeing him as a courageous victim of British bullying. Some of these REAF officers wanted to go further and Baghdadi later admitted that he advocated the assassination of those they now regarded as traitors, including pro-British officers and members of the new – in their eyes, collaborationist – government of Mustafa Nahas Pasha. However, Baghdadi's violent proposal was vehemently opposed by other cooler heads and he was voted down.

Instead, Baghdadi suggested contacting Ahmad Hasanain Pasha, the King's chef du cabinet whom the press portrayed as a brave and honourable man, to seek his opinion about the situation. They were especially keen to hear his opinion of the new Prime Minister, Nahas Pasha. Hasanain Pasha was contacted by telephone and he agreed to meet a small group of junior REAF officers the following day at one of Cairo's many social or sporting clubs. Baghdadi arrived in the company of *Tayyar Awal* Abd al-Hamid al-Dighaydi. The latter appears to have been Dighaydi *al-Sughair* who was still in the REAF although it might have been Dighaydi *al-Kabir* who had been transferred to the Army as a disciplinary measure.

When they put forward the idea of assassinating Nahas Pasha because he had agreed to form a government 'at the points of British bayonets', Hasanain Pasha was appalled. He told them that they were young and naive and that Mustafa Nahas was a patriot who was simply doing his best for the country under very difficult circumstances. After this meeting, the executive committee of Baghdadi's organisation decided that something other than political assassination needed to be done. That was when they started work on a plan to gather military information about the British and then somehow, to take such information to the Axis commander in North Africa, General Erwin Rommel. The German General was, in any case, expected to soon be knocking on the gates of Cairo.

Mustafa Nahas Pasha would remain Prime Minister of Egypt until 10 October 1944 and would, to the surprise of some, lead a government that proved to be a loyal supporter of the Allied war effort. This was the fourth time that he had served as Prime Minister, in addition to serving as a minister in earlier Egyptian governments. For the first time since the start of the Second World War, an Egyptian politician took the lead in implementing the Anglo-Egyptian treaty in both letter and spirit. Nahas Pasha emphatically proclaimed himself to be a friend of Britain and its allies in the struggle against Nazism and Fascism, while at the same time making it clear that his overriding loyalty was to Egypt. Meanwhile, most of the Egyptian officer corps adopted the same attitude but not all.

The war on the land and in the skies of Egypt had continued throughout this crisis, becoming increasingly desperate for the British. The presence of No. 2 Squadron REAF at Almaza made it easier for this unit's most dissident members to plan anti-British activities. No. 5 was, meanwhile, at Shallufa aerodrome just north of Suez, still endeavouring to use its Gladiator to defend the area by day. Here, on 1 February Abu Zaid flew the first of his 23 sorties during that notably busy month, taking off at 0955 in Gladiator L9035. The following night a RAF Wellington night bomber of No. 38 Squadron flew into the sea while flying over Suez Bay, perhaps while training in torpedo-dropping from very low altitude.

On 2 February, Abu Zaid took off at 0930 in Magister L219 for an unspecified reason; this being repeated at 1000 the following day in the same aeroplane. This pattern would be repeated although the intermittent flights in Magisters was not explained. A 'patrol' in Gladiator N5477 taking off at 1710 on 5 February, was followed by a flight in Magister L219 taking off at 0915 on the 6th. On the 7th, Abu Zaid made two flights in Gladiators L9037 and L9040 at 0905 and 0955 respectively. After a day on the ground, Abu Zaid was in the air again on the 9th, taking off at 0910 in Magister L219, followed by a flight in Gladiator L9037 taking off at 0900 on the 10th. After a few days without flying, on Friday 13 February 1942, Abu Zaid made two 'patrols' in Gladiator L9035, the first taking off at 1130, the second taking off at 1600. On the 14th, he flew again this time in Gladiator L9040 taking off at 0935; doing precisely the same the following day in Gladiator L9036. On the 16th, he took off five minutes earlier in Gladiator L9034 and again in L9036 at 1005, these probably being test flights. Abu Zaid's flight on the 17th was specified as a 'patrol', taking off at 1055 in Gladiator L9036. It was perhaps two days later – though the date is unclear – that Abu Zaid again went up in Magister L219, having taken off at 0900. His sortie in Gladiator L9040 at 0845 on the 22nd may have been another test flight; this being followed later in the day for a 'patrol' in Gladiator L9036 at 1430. On the 24th, he took up Gladiator N5758 at 0910, followed the following day by two flights; the first in Gladiator L9034 at 0925 and the second 40 minutes later in Magister L208. Abu Zaid's last flight in February 1942 was on the 28th in Gladiator L9040, taking off at 0920.

Nahas Pasha's position as Prime Minister was soon confirmed by a general election after which, the Prime Minister was confident enough to order the release of General Aziz al-Masri from detention. This may have been on the same day, 5 March 1942, that al-Masri's co-accused, Hussain-Zulfiqar Sabri and Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf, were similarly released. All three men were welcomed as heroes on the streets of Cairo but the two pilots were nevertheless transferred to the army as a disciplinary measure while General al-Masri remained under security surveillance for the rest of the war. The British also persuaded Nahas Pasha to place the former Prime Minister, Ali Mahir of the Sa'adist Party, under strict surveillance.

Meanwhile in the skies above Suez and the southern part of the Suez Canal, No. 5 Squadron continued to fly patrols in its archaic Gloster Gladiators under the continuing command of *Qa'id Sirb* Muhammad Hafiz. The unit had now received a number of new pilots, each with the rank of *Tayyar Thani* (Second Pilot or Pilot officer in RAF terms) which suggests that they had probably just got their wings at the FTS.

Abu Zaid's first flight of March was on the 2nd of the month in Gladiator N5711 (though the serial number is unclear), having taken off at 1015. Two days later, he was in Almaza (how he got there is unknown) from where he flew alone in Magister L230 'cross-country' back to Suez. Maybe *Tayyar Awal* Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid had gone to Almaza for a preliminary meeting with the new pilots who were about to join his flight. On 7 March, Abu Zaid took off at 1115 in Gladiator N5758 and the following day, he flew a 'patrol' in Gladiator L9031, having taken off at 1250. On the 9th and 10th March, he took up Magister L208 at 0830 and 1025 respectively. On March 13, Abu Zaid flew another 'patrol', this time in L9036, taking off at 1525, followed by a flight in Gladiator L9040 on the 14th, taking off at 0930.

There was a pause before Abu Zaid took up another Gladiator, probably N5758, although the serial number is again unclear, at 1100 on 23 March, followed by a flight in Magister L208 at 1155 the same day. Next day, Abu Zaid made the first 'local flight' with one of the squadron's new pilots, *Tayyar Thani* Sharabi in Magister L208 at 0855. This was probably a familiarisation flight for the new man as Abu Zaid himself was 'first pilot' with Sharabi as his passenger. Next day, the 25th, Abu Zaid did the same in the same Magister for *Tayyar Thani* Buray (this name is not entirely clear), taking off at 0910. On 26 March Abu Zaid was required to fly two 'patrols' in Gladiator L9035, taking off at 1300 and 1420. This was followed by another familiarisation flight for *Tayyar Thani* Misiri in Magister L208 at 0905. Abu Zaid's last flight of March 1942 was described as 'army cooperation and low level attack', presumably for training, in Gladiator L9040 on the 30th, taking off at 1000.

Very little information is available concerning several of the REAF's squadrons in this period although it seems likely that Mustafa Mahir may now have been in command of No. 4 Squadron with the rank of *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant). On 8 April, Ali Mahir, the ex-Prime Minister of Egypt, was placed under house arrest at British insistence. Also, from April onwards, American merchant ships were once again permitted by the US government to operate in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea; the USA having joined the Allied belligerent powers back in December 1941.

No. 5 Squadron REAF continued flying regular patrols over Suez and the southern part of the Suez Canal during April although no Axis attacks on the area were recorded. Six of Abu Zaid's 17 sorties were such 'patrols', including his first flight of the month, taking off at 1820 on the 6th in Gladiator L9036. The reasons for his next four flights were not recorded but consisted of two flights on the 7th, both in Gladiator L9035 taking off at 0900 and 0920, presumably to test the aeroplane. On the 9th he took up Gladiator L9034 at 0920, followed by L9036 at 0915 on the 11th. Abu Zaid's next four flights were Gladiator 'patrols', taking off in L9041 at 1730 on the 11th; in L9034 at 0715 on the 12th, in L9034 at 1215, again on the 12th and in L9036 at 1520 on the 14th. After a few days rest, he flew Gladiator L9040 twice on the 20th, at 0840 and 0905, then took up the same aeroplane on the 21st at 0925. The date of his next flight is illegible but was in Gladiator L9036 at 0920, following by a 'patrol' in L9034 at 1735 on the 24th. On the 28th, Abu Zaid took up Gladiator L9032 at 0925, then Gladiator N5771 at 0940 on the 29th. According to his log-book, his first flight in April 1942 was in Magister L228, taking off at 1030 although the date is given as 28th of the month, perhaps an error or having been added out of sequence.

In May, there was a shake-up of the government of Prime Minister Nahas Pasha but otherwise, the political situation in Cairo seemed to be relatively stable despite the worsening Allied situation in the Western Desert. The British and their allies had fallen back to a strong defensive front called the Gazala Line. However, they had also significantly underestimated enemy strength as a result of greatly exaggerating the losses which the British had inflicted upon the enemy during Operation Crusader. Furthermore, a catastrophic breach of security and an intelligence failure at the American embassy in Cairo, meant that General Rommel and his Italian allies could read sensitive and vital British messages. The result was the catastrophic Battle of Gazala (26 May to 21 June 1942). This not only sent British and Allied forces reeling back towards al-Alamain in Egypt but had a terrible impact upon British military prestige in Egypt while raising the reputation of German General Rommel to almost mythical heights as 'The Desert Fox'.

Under such circumstances, the defence of the British and Allied rear areas in Egypt and above all, their supply lines from the Red Sea to a hastily prepared new defensive front at al-Alamain, became even more important. One of the RAF pilots who flew during these dark days was Squadron Leader G.W. Houghton. He recalled his experiences in *They Flew Through Sand* (London 1991), in which he described how the British lost almost all their heavy equipment in the Battle of Gazala and subsequent retreat but were nevertheless being resupplied by the convoys which sailed around Africa and up the Red Sea to Suez. Suez and its harbours were still the vulnerable bottleneck that they had been since the start of the desert campaign but now, the roads from Suez to Cairo and from there to Alexandria and the al-Alamain defensives, were full of even more vulnerable columns of supply lorries. To quote Houghton:

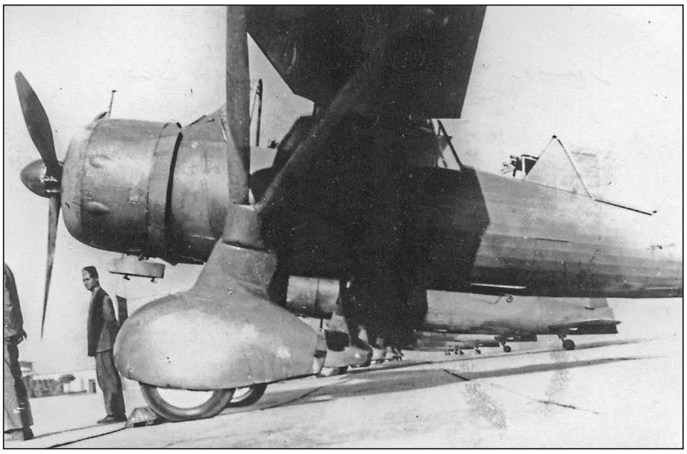
> Almost daily, great convoys came into the port of Suez and in a never-ending stream, the vital equipment and supplies were rushed to the battle area.
>
> Perhaps the greatest task that the Allied Air Forces was called upon to perform was to safeguard those precious road convoys on the Cairo-Alexandria road. We had to prevent the Hun from preventing us being strong enough in the field to drive him back from Alamein.

Houghton's book was written and published in 1942 and perhaps, for that reason, he makes no mention of the role of the REAF's Nos. 2, 5 and perhaps also, 6 Squadrons based at Cairo and Suez respectively. They too, were expected the provide some degree of cover for the road convoys and, in the case of No. 5 Squadron at Suez, also for the vital transport shipping assembled off the southern end of the Canal.

Following General Aziz al-Masri's unauthorised attempt to fly to Beirut, British Military Intelligence had taken the problem of subversion and anti-British sentiment in the Egyptian armed forces, more seriously. This resulted in a highly detailed report being produced in May 1942. It concluded that the so-called subversives were very few in number and were largely inspired by, or in close touch with, the Egyptian Royal Palace. In other words, the men involved were nationalist royalists rather than being pro-Fascist or pro-German. On the other hand, the authors of the British report recognised that a 'secret organisation' had been formed, partly as a result of German propaganda efforts, to undermine what the British described as 'the very useful work done by the Egyptian Army'. The report also included a list of the names of 'believed members' of this secret organisation – a list which, with one possible exception, did not include any of the men now known to have been members of what subsequently became, Colonel Nasser's 'Free Officers Movement'.

The British intelligence operatives who drew up this remarkable report, feared a military uprising by elements within the Egyptian armed forces if the German and Italian amies broke through into the Nile Delta and the Egyptian heartlands. They suggested that the 'secret organisation' was actually headed by Umar Fathy who represented King Faruq himself. Much more shockingly for the British, this supposed organisation also included well-known REAF officers whom the British regarded as amongst the best, most skilled and committed men in the Egyptian Air Force: namely Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia, Ibrahim Hassan Gazarine, Kamal al-Din Hamada, Ahmad Shawki, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid and Sa'id al-Sha'l. There were also several more senior officers, such as Muhammad Abd al-Mun'im Ahmad, Ahmad Nagi, Muhammad

Qa'id Sirb (Flight Lieutenant) Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia with five pilots of No. 2 Gladiator Fighter Squadron, REAF, at Suez in June 1940. (EAF Museum collection)



One of the REAF's Westland Lysanders in the new desert camouflage scheme applied early in the Second World War but before its Egyptian national and other markings had been reapplied. (EAF Museum collection)

Egyptian pilots studying a map, either before a patrol or during training. The fact that the RAF Gloster Gladiator in background has full REAF national markings on its tail suggests that it was part of No. 2 Squadron and was probably photographed at Suez aerodrome around 1941. (EAF Museum collection)

Abd al-Halim Khalifa and Isma'il Hakki Harun who was described as being 'particularly active', as well as officers already known to be very close to King Faruq, such as the royal pilot Hussan Aqif.

From the Egyptian Army was *Sagh* (Major) Abd al-Rahman Zaki, who was described in the reports as a 'secret leader' and one of three men who probably held the organisation's documents and records. Abd al-Rahman Zaki was currently the Director General of the Ministry of National Defence. He would later be appointed as the first Director of the Egyptian Military Museum and was interviewed by the author in 1973. Another senior Army member was Hussain Kamil, perhaps a future 'Free Officer'. Muhammad Naguib was said to be an influential member within the Egyptian Army although, on at least one occasion, he refused to kiss the King's hand. Naguib subsequently joined Nasser's Free Officers Movement in 1949 and became the first President of the Egyptian Republic when the monarchy was abolished on 18 June 1953. He remained in that role until 14 November 1954 when he was succeeded by Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Another Army member was Sayid Mahmud Tahir, currently based in Alexandria and later to earn fame as the 'Lion of Falluja' during the Palestine War. The British were clearly disturbed by the fact that this supposedly anti-British organisation, included several of the Army's best and most technically qualified officers.

The report further described these men as very supportive of the Egyptian monarchy, opposed to the Wafd Party and its leader, the current Egyptian Prime Minister Mustafa Nahas. They were also deeply opposed to the British Empire, in which capacity they had contacts with anti-imperialist organisations elsewhere in the Islamic world – but they were not specifically 'anti-British'. Furthermore, the report claimed, largely correctly, that the organisation had been founded by General Aziz al-Masri in 1939. It is also interesting to note that the report maintained that the secret organisation's badge was said to incorporate an Egyptian flag, a revolver and a cord – the latter perhaps recalling the bowstring with which 'traitors' within the old Ottoman Royal Family had been executed.

None of the men listed as members of this 'pro-Palace association' of potential subversives are known to have been involved in any direct action against the British in Egypt. Such action would come from a different group of which the British intelligence and secret services appear to have been completely unaware. As far as the available evidence goes, the REAF's No. 1 Sqn. does not seem to have been involved in any of these goings on, perhaps because its men still had a clear and active role in the war. No. 2 Squadron was a different matter and it was here that Abd al-Latif Baghdadi and his associates were most active.

No. 5 Squadron included at least one member of the pro-palace, supposedly secret organisation – namely Muhammad Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid. He and his colleagues under *Qa'id Sirb* Muhammad Hafiz were still busy at Suez, if not particularly effective in their archaic Gloster Gladiators. On 4 May 1942, Abu Zaid made his first flight of that month, 'cross-country Suez to Almaza' in Gladiator L9035 at 0855. Later the same day, he took off again in Gladiator N5758 at 1630 to fly a 'patrol'. This was probably from Almaza although there is no evidence that No. 5 Squadron as a whole, moved back to Almaza at this time. Three days later he flew as a passenger in Magister L219 with *Qa'id Sirb* Hafiz as first pilot, taking off at 0900. Perhaps Abu Zaid was being familiarised with the current situation around Cairo or was simply being taken back to Suez. On the 8th, he took off on 'patrol' in Gladiator N4758 at 1140.

On the 10th, Abu Zaid flew Gladiator L9034 for an unspecified reason, taking off at 0905. Next day, he was in the air twice; the first time taking off at 0840 in Gladiator L9036 for 'air firing air to ground' and secondly in Gladiator L9040 for an unspecified reason. On the 12th, Abu Zaid again flew twice, his first take off at 0840 being in Gladiator N5771 or N5471, his second at 1025 in Gladiator

L9040 being on 'patrol'. He flew another 'patrol' in Gladiator L9040 on the 16th, taking off at 1005. This was followed on 18 May by 'air firing air to ground' in Gladiator L9035, taking off at 0830. On the 20th, Abu Zaid flew Magister L214, taking off at 1030 for an unspecified reason. The following day he was in the air twice in Gladiator N5758, taking off at 0840 and 0900. After a day without flying Abu Zaid took to the air in Gladiator L9035 at 0755, for an unspecified reason. His flight in Gladiator L9032 at 0830 on the 25th was again for an unspecified reason but Abu Zaid's last flight in May 1942, in Gladiator N5758 at 1040, was for a 'formation fighter attack'.

June 1942 was a time of great peril for the British and their allies, as Rommel's forces retook the Libyan port of Tobruk on 21 June. Axis forces then crossed the frontier on the 24th and pushed hard towards Alexandria. The confidence of the Egyptian government in Britain's ability to defend the country was being severely strained. Under pressure from the Egyptian parliament, Prime Minister Nahas Pasha sought assurances that British forces would make a stand rather than retreating to Palestine and leaving Egypt to its fate. Ambassador Lampson confirmed that the British would continue to defend Egypt and in response, Nahas Pasha ordered a heightening of security within the Egyptian heartlands to ensure they remained a safe base for British and Allied forces.

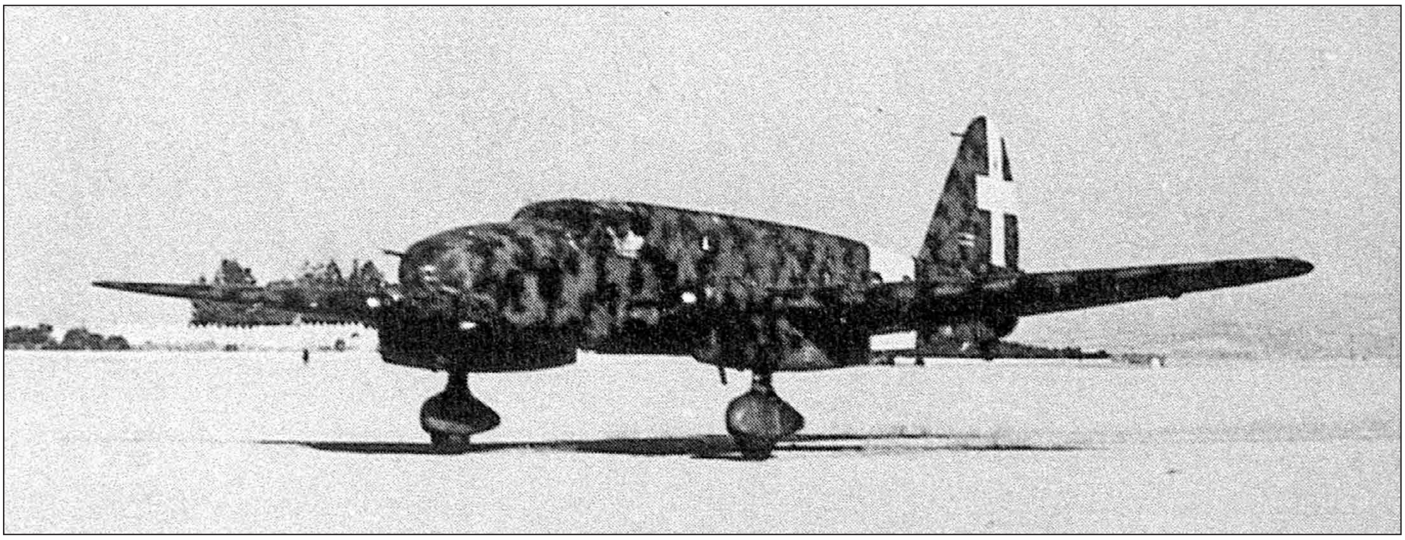
Unfortunately, some of the more desperate British plans began to leak out. Though essentially true, they were also exaggerated in parts of the Egyptian press and were said to include a plan to flood the Nile Delta in an effort to slow German and Italian armoured forces. Other aspects of Britain's supposed scorched earth policy included destroying Egypt's few industries and its communications systems as well as the irrigation dams which were essential to the agriculture which kept Egypt's millions alive. All this horrified many in the Egyptian armed forces who saw their duty as defending Egypt, not destroying it.

At the same time, there are Egyptian sources – not always confirmed by British ones – that claim that the RAF now asked the REAF for more direct assistance. For example, Faisal Abd al-Mun'im claims that the severe losses suffered by the RAF caused the head of the British Advisory Mission to ask that the REAF's fighter squadrons provide direct cover for British troops at they retreated towards al-Alamain. This was transmitted via *Qa'id Asrab* (Squadron Leader) Hassan Izzat to the REAF's Director of Military Operations – perhaps *Qa'id Janah* (Wing Com.) Miqaati without the knowledge of the Egyptian Chief of Staff's office. Such an interpretation is probably an exaggeration although it does seem that Nos. 2 and 6 Sqs. were given greater responsibilities across a wider area, unwittingly enabling dissidents in No. 2 Squadron to carry out unauthorised and hostile reconnaissance of some British rear areas.

Egyptian confidence in British defence was certainly not strengthened by the sight of British officials burning large numbers of official documents in the grounds of the British Embassy. This was to prevent them falling into enemy hands but also was in full view of the Egyptian public. With Rommel's troops apparently poised to reach the Nile and with many British civil and military officials in Cairo clearly fearing that Egypt could well fall to the enemy, it is hardly surprisingly that near panic in the British Embassy infected many Egyptian officials and some Egyptian officers.

A British victory at the First Battle of al-Alamain from 1 to 27 July 1942, stopped Rommel's headlong advance but British morale remained shaky. There were many in Egypt who still believed that the British success at al-Alamain merely delayed the inevitable Axis overrunning of Egypt. It would take the arrival of a new British commander, Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery and several months of careful rebuilding of British and Allied strength in Egypt, followed by another Allied victory at the Second Battle of al-Alamain (23 October to 11 November 1942) to fundamentally change perceptions.

Between the two battles of al-Alamain came an event which although relatively minor in military terms, had a very serious impact upon Egyptian opinions, both civilian and more particularly, military. This was the occupation of Siwa Oasis by the Italians. Having been successfully held by Egyptian troops during the early part of the North African Campaign, Siwa was handed over to British troops on British insistence and the Egyptian garrison was withdrawn to Bahariyah. On 23 July 1942, however, the first group of 30 Junkers Ju 52/3m transports carrying Italian troops arrived, escorted by 19 Messerschmitt Bf.110 twin-engine fighters led by Hauptmann Herzberg of the Luftwaffe's III/ZG 26. On landing at the airstrip several kilometres from the oasis itself, they were met by Major Jakob Burkhard's fifty-strong force which had arrived overland from Jalu Oasis in neighbouring Libya. They in turn, had already discovered that the British garrison had abandoned Siwa and its estimated 3,000 inhabitants, without firing a shot.



A Caproni Ca.309 Ghibli of the Italian Regia Aeronautica landing at Siwa airstrip during the Second World War. The fact that the British Army insisted on taking over the defence of Siwa Oasis from the Egyptians, then abandoned it to the enemy in July 1942 without a fight, gravely undermined confidence in the British amongst the Egyptian military, including the REAF. (Author's collection)

The area was thenceforth held by a small Italian garrison of less than 450 troops of the *Divisione Corazzata Giovani Fascisti* while a Flight of Regia Aeronautica Ca 310s or Ca 309s from No. 12 *Squadriglia Aviazone Presidio Coloniale* installed itself at the nearby airstrip. Though the occasional Ju 87 dive-bomber visited Siwa, this dusty, unmade airstrip was declared unsuitable for use by the German Luftwaffe. At one point, an extension to the airstrip was proposed to make it suitable for Italian Air Force's Fiat CR 42 biplane fighters although this was not carried out. In fact, the crude airfield north of Siwa Oasis lay outside the new Italian garrison's defensive perimeter and so was only used when necessary.

With British and Allied forces having already fallen back to their new defensive line at al-Alamain, the continued defence of Siwa by the British was probably not a practical proposition. This was despite the fact that it served as a useful position on the communications route between British forces in the Egyptian heartlands and the Free French – now installed at Kufra. Nevertheless, its abandonment further undermined the Egyptian Army and Air Force's faith in the British willingness and ability to defend Egypt. Meanwhile, there were also reports that the Italians were attempting to establish a puppet Egyptian 'government in waiting' at Siwa. Other sources suggest that the Italians intended to incorporate Siwa and a substantial slice of western Egypt into their existing colony of Libya.

While dramatic events were unfolding in the Western Desert, most units of the REAF continued doing what they had been doing over the previous few months. Officers like Hassan Tawfiq went to work in the technical and engineering departments while senior officers such as Abd al-Mun'in al-Miqaati and Ahmad Abd al-Raziq struggled to keep the REAF Headquarters working properly, amid an atmosphere of increasing concern. The Gladiators of No. 2 Squadron remained responsible for the defence of Cairo during daylight hours, while No. 5 continued to do the same at Suez.

Abu Zaid's first flight in June was on the 9th, taking off at 0935 in Gladiator L9036. There was then a pause of several days before he took to the air in Magister L205 at 0845 on the 13th. The 14th of June was clearly a busy day for Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid, with an unusually early morning take off in Gladiator L9034 at 0605 before a 'patrol practice' in the same aeroplane at 1000 and an actual 'patrol', again in L9034, taking off at 1700. The term 'patrol practice' suggests that the previous 'patrols' in his log-book had been active rather than training sorties.

The following day, Abu Zaid only flew once, taking off in Gladiator L9032 at 0935. He took this machine up again on the 16th at 0835. On the 17th, Abu Zaid was once more in the cockpit of Gladiator L9034 at 0840 and in L9035 at 0615 on the 18th. The 18th was an especially busy day, with Abu Zaid taking to the air in Gladiators four times. His second flight was at 0720 in L9036, his third in L9040 at 0855 and his fourth, in L9035 at 0950. The first three were probably test flights but the fourth was described as a 'patrol'. On June 20, Abu Zaid took off in Gladiator L9036 at 0840. On the 22nd, he flew three times, all probably tests, taking off at 0615 in Gladiator N5758, in L9040 at 0710 and at 0915 in L9035. On the 23rd, he took up Gladiator L9032 at 0845. On the 24th, his first flight was in Magister L205 at 0825, followed by a flight in Gladiator N5758 at 0905. Abu Zaid again flew Magister L205 on the 25th, taking off at 0825, followed by Gladiator L9036 at 0605 on the 26th and finally, Gladiator L9036 at 0830 on the 27th. This time, the page in his log-book was signed by *Qa'id Sirb* Hafiz and checked by *Tayyar Awal* Abd Allah.

July 1942 saw the greatest crisis endured by the REAF throughout the Second World War. It was also a time of considerable stress for the British and their allies as they sought to build-up their strength behind defensive lines at al-Alamain. A confidential report drawn up for the British Foreign and War Offices confirmed that one REAF squadron was still responsible for the defence of the Suez Canal between Suez and Ismailiya during daytime – this currently being No. 5. However, the Egyptians were now supported over Suez itself by two British RAF squadrons, one for daylight hours and another at night. The aerodrome at Suez was nevertheless a solely Egyptian responsibility while another REAF squadron remained responsible for defending Cairo during daytime – this currently being No. 2 Squadron There was no mention of newly formed No. 6 Squadron or its responsibilities at Alexandria.

On 3 July 1942, three Cant Z.1007bis of the *Regia Aeronautice No. 47 Stormo* attacked Ismailiya airfield where previous Axis air-raids had virtually destroyed the RAF's main Technical Depot. Meanwhile, No. 87 Gruppo sent six Cant Z.1007bis on their first night bombing assault on airfields close to the Suez Canal. The following day, 4 July, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid flew two 'patrols' in Gladiator N5762, taking off at 1250 and 1840 respectively. The following night, 4/5 July, No. 87 Gruppo again attacked the same targets. According to British sources, between 15 and 20 enemy bombers, Cant Z.1007bis and Ju 88s, attacked targets along the whole length of the Suez Canal from Port Said to Suez. RAF night-fighting Beaufighters of No. 89 Squadron claimed to have shot down six of the raiders. In reality seven bombers had been downed: two Cant Z.1007bis, two SM 82s and three Ju 88s, including one shot down by Egyptian anti-aircraft fire near Suez.

Despite their losses, these Axis bombers had inflicted considerable damage, with the Egyptian Coastguard and Fisheries Administration and newly re-established Navy, suffering its first significant loss. This was when the transport vessel *HMES Al-Amira Fawzia* was sunk in shallow water off Suez during the air-raid of 28 July 1942.

Built and launched in northern England in 1929, this ship was subsequently raised and remained in Coastguard service. In 1952, she was renamed *Al-Qusayr* and a short while later, was transferred to the Egyptian Army as a military transport. The British also lost a small ship on the same occasion with the boom defence vessel *HMS Punnet* under Boom Engineer W.E. Howes Royal Naval Reserve, being hit. She had arrived at Suez at the end of December 1941. As a result of these Axis air-raids, the Suez Canal was effectively shut for about a week.

Abu Zaid was reportedly one of a number of REAF officers awarded medals for their efforts against Italian raiders during this period although he made no claims to have intercepted or fired upon the enemy, still less to have brought any down. In fact, it is more likely that all the pilots involved were awarded a campaign medal rather than individuals being singled out for special commendation. Thereafter, Abu Zaid's log-book shows that he did not fly from 5 to 26 July, perhaps being on leave after a strenuous period.

On the 27th, he took up Magister L208 at 0825, following a 'flight test' specifically described as such, in Gladiator L8016 at 1115 on July 28. This was also the first mention of a Gloster Gladiator with a serial number in this range; the machine having probably been recently transferred to the REAF from RAF stocks. Having been signed off by *Qa'id Surb* Muhammad Hafiz the CO of No. 5 Squadron, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid's log-book then contained several blank pages, covering the rest of 1942 and the first part of 1943 when he did not fly for about 13 months. In fact, Abu Zaid was one of those REAF pilots who were disciplined in the wake of the scandal which erupted in No. 2 Squadron (see below).

Meanwhile, the more experienced men who formed the REAF's newest squadron, No. 6 with Hurricane Mk. Is, were clearly having difficulty becoming fully operational. One of their first Hurricanes was lost in an accident on 29 July 1942 but in the meantime, three others had arrived. Throughout this period and long after, Egyptian Army anti-aircraft gunners and searchlight crews were frequently in action in various locations, earning the unstinting praise of their British and Allied comrades, not only for steadiness under fire but also for their accurate shooting.

The mood was very different amongst some of the pilots of No. 2 Squadron based at Almaza. This unit was at the centre of a remarkably daring, if also rather pointless, plot by Gladiator pilots Abd al-Latif Baghdadi, Wagih Abaza and Ahmed Sa'udi, plus Hassan Izzat of the REAF Fighter Wing's supply service and Anwar Sadat of the Egyptian Army. Writing more than a decade after the event, Anwar Sadat merely stated that he and his co-conspirators feared that if the Germans conquered Egypt, the country would be handed over to Italy to be added to the existing Italian empire in north and east Africa. Therefore, they decided to try to sabotage British military communication. Baghdadi added more detail, writing in 1952 that:

> When the Germans were close to Egypt, I, Ahmad Sa'udi, Hasan Izzat, Muhammad Wagih Abaza – all of us in the Air Force – and First Lieutenant Anwar Sadat [of the Army] thought it our duty to do something against the British. We formed a secret organisation in the Air Force to disrupt and impede British withdrawal from the Western Desert by sabotaging their lines of communication and supply.

Meanwhile, the German Abwehr continued to try and establish its own spies inside Egypt. These were Operation Salem and Operation Kondor which eventually did get two secret agents into the Egyptian capital. Named Eppler and Sandstette, they were not only singularly inefficient and ineffective but were also soon caught. However, before being arrested, they made contact with a number of disaffected Egyptian officers from both the Army and Air Force.

According to Saul Kelly's research, the first to be contacted was Flight Lieutenant Hassan Izzat of the REAF, on 21 July 1942. Apparently Eppler and Sandstette were primarily looking for a way of getting themselves back to the safety of Axis lines. Izzat was initially suspicious but after he was convinced that they really were German agents, he arranged a meeting with General Aziz al-Masri two days later. Whether, as was later claimed by some sources, the retired Egyptian General himself wanted to get to Germany remains open to doubt. The following day, 24 July, the incompetent spies again met Hassan Izzat, Aziz al-Masri and Anwar Sadat. This time Sadat is said to have 'boasted that one of the targets they had photographed had already been bombed by the G.A.F. [German Air Force]', or so a later British intelligence report claimed.

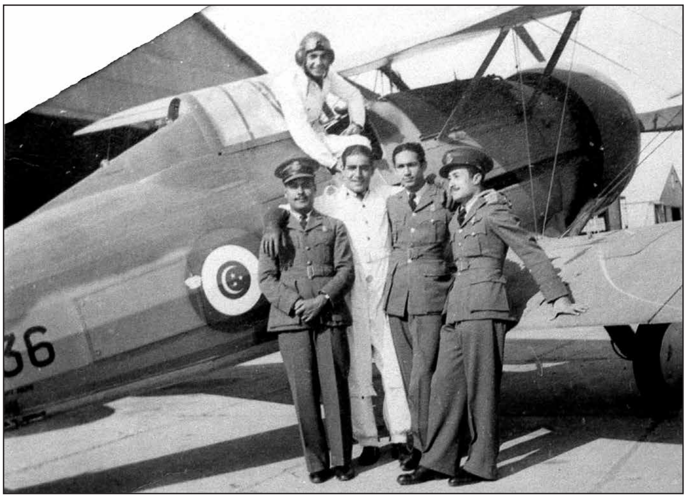
Just under a fortnight earlier, Gladiator pilot Ahmad Sa'udi Hussain had taken off on an unauthorised mission to carry a 'treaty' from the Egyptian conspirators to General Erwin Rommel, only to be shot down and killed by a Luftwaffe fighter ace in the vicinity of al-Daba'a. His fate was still a mystery to his colleagues but the events around that doomed mission are now well-known. The naive young Egyptian officers had written what they described as a 'treaty' in which they offered an 'alliance' to General Rommel, suggesting that they join the Axis powers against the British in return for their country's genuine independence. This document would then be flown across the lines by one of the Gladiator pilots. Naive as they were, the conspirators also hoped to convince the Germans of their good faith by giving aerial photographs of various British military instillations. These had been taken by Baghdadi, Hassan Ibrahim, Ahmad Sa'udi Hussain and perhaps, also Hassan Izzat, with hand-held cameras from their cockpits during June. Along with their 'treaty' and the poor quality photographs (supposedly numbering 1,500, which sounds unlikely), they would add maps showing various British positions.

Again, according to Baghdadi, the plot was finalised on 29 June 1942. Just over a week later, the four pilots met to discuss who would fly this dangerous mission. On the day in question, Hassan Ibrahim was due to be 'on alert' in one of the squadron's currently operational Gladiators but according to Hassan Izzat, *Tayyar Thani* Ahmad Sa'udi Hussain claimed that it was his turn to fly. Whether Hassan Ibrahim was part of the plot is not entirely clear (although he probably was). In any case, there was an argument which was eventually settled, according to Anwar Sadat, by the toss of a coin. Sa'udi won and it was agreed that Hassan Ibrahim would remain in bed on the morning in question, supposedly feeling unwell and that Sa'udi would therefore, be 'on alert' in his place. Sa'udi then took off early in the morning of 7 July without authorisation and headed for Marsa Matruh where he hoped to find General Erwin Rommel and to give him a leather bag containing the 'treaty', the photographs and the maps.

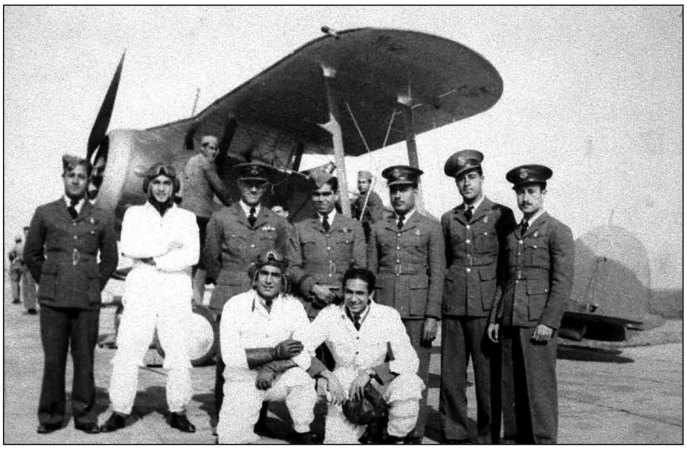
At 0720 hours, in the vicinity of al-Daba'a, Ahmad Sa'udi Hussain Abu Ali was intercepted by two Bf.109s of the *Luftwaffe's* I/JG27 and was shot down in flames by Lieutenant Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt. The latter ended up as Germany's third highest-scoring ace in the desert campaign with a claim of 59 enemy aeroplanes destroyed. Apparently, the recognition signals previously arranged with German spies in Egypt were either not seen, not understood or more likely, had never been passed to the Luftwaffe's front-line squadrons. According to Eliezer Be'eri, in his book *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society* (New York 1970), Ahmad Sa'udi was preparing to land at Mersa Matruh – which is clearly incorrect – and that he died later, perhaps in an Axis medical facility at Mersa Matruh, presumably of injuries suffered when he was brought down – which might well be true.

When Anwar Sadat at the Egyptian Army's Signals Corps base at Jabal al-Asfar (al-Khankah) received no message either from Ahmad Sa'udi or from the Germans, he realised that something had gone wrong so Sadat informed the other conspirators at Almaza. Consequently, *Dabat Saff* (Warrent Officer) Muhammad Ridwan Salim took off in another Gladiator the following morning, 8 July, to make a second attempt to reach the German lines with further copies of what Ahmad Sa'udi had been carrying. This flight was not intercepted and Salim reached German-held territory where he succeeded in delivering another leather satchel with the documents and photographs.

Initially, it seems that senior officers of No. 2 Squadron and at REAF Headquarters all thought that Sau'di had got lost and made a forced landing in the desert near Cairo during a training mission. They also believed that Ridwan had probably been searching for him but as soon as it became clear that Wajih Abaza had supplied both men with additional maps, suspicions were aroused. Once the Germans made public the fact that Ridwan had 'deserted' to their lines, the British and Egyptian security services realised that something more serious was afoot. Meanwhile *Dabat Saff* (Warrent Officer) Ridwan Salim was interrogated by the Germans. After Axis forces were driven out of North Africa in May 1943, Ridwan was



Tayyar Thani (Pilot Officer) Muhammad Abu Zaid and colleagues of No. 5 Squadron REAF, with one of their unit's Gloster Gladiators around 1941 or early 1942. (Abu Zaid family archive)

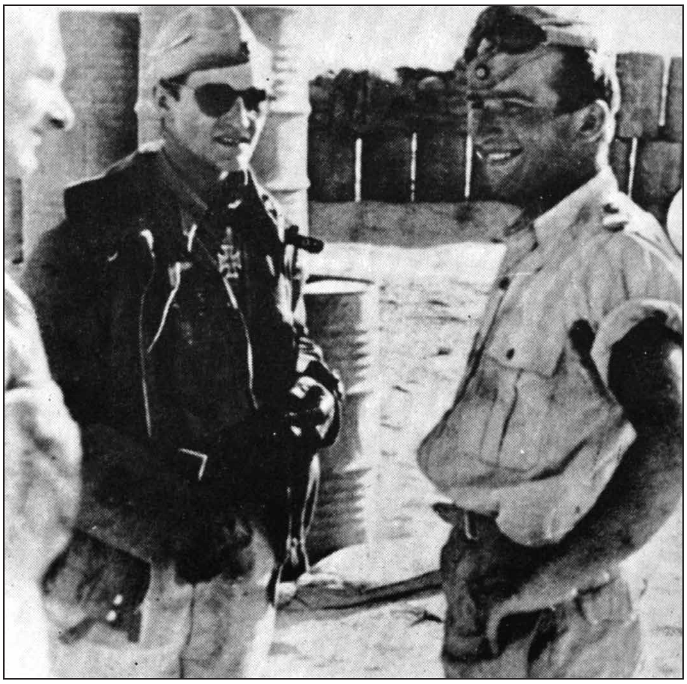


Muhammad Abu Zaid, kneeling and wearing flying gauntlets, with fellow pilots of No. 5 Squadron REAF, probably in 1941 or early 1942. The RAF officer standing third from the left is probably Squadron Ldr. Coote, No. 5 Squadron's advisor on attachment from the British Advisory Mission. Also note the lack of tail stripes on this unit's Gloster Gladiator. (Abu Zaid family archive)

sent to Germany where he remained until the end of the Second World War. He was then captured and returned to Egypt to face trial.

The first Egyptian reaction to the disappearance of two Gladiators saw Hassan Ibrahim being disciplined for allowing his designated aeroplane to be flown by another man. His promotion was therefore delayed for six months, a normal punishment in such circumstances. There was, however, no mention of Ridwan taking a machine in which he was not supposed to fly. A preliminary investigation came to the conclusion that Sa'udi and Ridwan had acted alone on their own initiative and the names of the other conspirators were not uncovered. It is clear that at this point, the intelligence services had no knowledge of the broader conspiracy within the REAF and Army.

Later in July 1942, the British Advisory Mission drew up its own report on the affair, in which it stated that three REAF pilots had made unauthorised flights, perhaps including an earlier 'intelligence gathering' flight by one of the conspirators. It described the flights of 7 and 8 July, which had resulted in Sa'udi's death and Ridwan's defection, as 'unauthorised training flights'. The report also expressed surprise that none of the men involved had any previous blemish to their records. It is interesting to note that their names were absent from the list of potential 'subversives' mentioned in an earlier intelligence report (see above).



Lt. Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt (right) who brought down Ahmad Sa'udi Hussain, with his close friend the Luftwaffe fighter ace Oberleutnant Marseille (left). Stahlschmidt correctly identified his target as a Gloster Gladiator but for a time some aviation historians suggested that the victim might have been an Italian Fiat CR 42 because the RAF no longer used Gladiators in combat operations. (Hans Ring archive)

Hassan Ibrahim of the REAF, probably photographed later in his career. He was a leading figure in the group of Egyptian Army and Air Force officers who, believing that the Axis powers would win the war, sought to make contact with General Rommel's HQ during 1942. (Nur Bardai collection)

Abd al-Latif Baghdadi and his colleagues were nevertheless, disheartened by the lack of a German response to their proposed alliance. As Rommel's forces remained seemingly static in front of the rapidly strengthening British defences at al-Alamain, disillusion began to set in amongst the conspirators. Similarly, those who had anticipated a quick British collapse – including those amongst the 'pro-Palace' groups within Egypt's armed forces – began to think that maybe the Germans and Italians might not be victorious after all.

Hitler's obsessive preoccupation with the Eastern Front and the beginning of the Battle of Stalingrad also made many reconsider, especially after American forces began to arrive in Egypt. In fact, seven Boeing B-17F Flying Fortresses from the 9th Bomber Squadron of the 7th Bombardment Group had already landed at Fa'id next to

Liwa (Brig.) Husni Tahir Pasha took over as Director of the REAF following the Crisis 1942 and would remain in this role until 1944. Widely known for his pro-British sympathies, he was nevertheless another Army rather than Air Force officer who would have to "learn on the job". (EAF Museum collection)

Earlier in his career Hassan Izzat of No. 2 Squadron REAF had been the supplies officer for both of Egypt's fighter squadrons, Nos. 2 and 5. He was also one of the most politically active junior officers in the REAF, being a friend of the similarly politically committed Pilot Officer Abd al-Latif Baghdadi and Anwar Sadat of the Egyptian Army. (Author's collection)

the Suez Canal on 28 June, only to be temporarily moved to Palestine when it looked as if Rommel's forces might break through into the Nile Delta. This was rapidly followed by the creation of the new US Army Middle East Air Force (USAMEAF) which later became the US 9 Air Force. Clearly, the American committment to defeating the Germans in North Africa presented the Egyptian patriots with a very different scenario in which to work for the independence of their country.

In the meantime, the Egyptian government and High Command, not to mention the British military authorities in Egypt, had to decide how to deal with evident disaffection within parts of the REAF. What most struck the British Advisory Mission, according to its last report of 1942, was the way in which the bulk of the REAF 'remained calm' during the Allied retreat to al-Alamain. *Liwa* Ali Mu'afi, the Director of the REAF, had also offered to place his force's most important air-base, the aerodrome of Almaza, wholely at the disposal of the RAF and there had been no strain in the relations between the senior commands of the REAF and RAF.

On the other hand, at soon as the defections of Sa'udi and Ridwan had been confirmed, *Liwa* Ali Mu'afi insisted on resigning because of what he described as, a lack of discipline in the force under his command. This was accepted by the Egyptian Minister of Defence but the British Military Command, while understanding the REAF Director's decision, made clear that they regretted it. In fact, they felt that the allies had lost a true and influential friend. *Liwa* Ali Mu'afi was now replaced by another Army rather than REAF officer, none of the latter yet being senior enough for the role. This was *Liwa* Husni Tahir Pasha who was known for his pro-British sympathies. Unfortunately, the new Director of the REAF again had no experience of military aviation and would have to learn on the job.

In 1943, both of Tahir Pasha's predecessors, Abd al-Wahab Pasha and Ali Mu'afi would be awarded the title of CBE (Commander of the British Empire) by the British government which was not an action designed to heighten their reputation amongst more nationalistic officers in the Egyptian armed forces. Prior to that, victory over General Rommel and the Afrika Korps at the Second Battle of al-Alamayn had restored British military confidence along with some of its prestige in Egypt and the wider Arab World.

After a period of shock and mistrust, the British realised that to build and maintain support for the Allied cause in the REAF, this force had to be given a more active and positive role. To play such a role, the REAF must also be provided with proper training and more modern, effective equipment. In the meantime, the Egyptian government took drastic action on its own initiative and at the end of July, the entire REAF was grounded by the simple expedient of removing the magnetos from the engines of all its aeroplanes. This was the nadir of the REAF's fortunes in The Second World War. Indeed, at one point, the Egyptian government is said to have been so disillusioned that it suggested disbanding the entire Egyptian Air Force. This was not done, partly because the British authorities felt that it would have handed the Axis powers a huge propaganda victory.

In the meantime, the already overstretched British RAF had to take over responsibility for the air defence of the Suez area by day as well as by night. The removal of magnetos also meant that the REAF could not do any training except on the ground. This inevitably, resulted in widespread grumbling, much of it directed against those who had caused the problem rather than against the Egyptian government which had ordered the grounding or against the British whose reactions to the crisis were generally considered to have been understandable.

One of the lesser-known consequences of this grounding was the abandonment of Hassan Izzat's reported plan to carry German spies in Cairo back across the German lines. The REAF pilot is said to have hoped to fly Eppler from what was described as, an emergency landing ground 'near the Pyramids'. Quite where this was remains a mystery although the most likely candidate was close to the REAF's main live-firing and bombing range south of Cairo, near Dahshur. This also has a huge (although isolated) ancient Egyptian pyramid known as the 'Bent Pyramid'.

Gloster Gladiators of No. 2 Squadron REAF at Suez aerodrome on 14th June 1940. Gladiator number L9028 also has an RAF individual code on each side of the fuselage roundel, including the letters Y and C. The first letter was P, though this cannot be seen here. In the background are two of the REAF Avro Ansons which undertook regular anti-submarine patrols down the Gulf of Suez during this period. (EAF Museum collection)

On the night of 24–25 July, the Egyptian Police and British Field Security service arrested both the German spies, Eppler and Sandstette. This was followed by the arrest of both Hassan Izzat and Anwar Sadat on 12th August; the two Egyptian officers being identified by Eppler and Sandstette at an identification parade the following day. General Aziz al-Masri was next, being pulled in on 14 August after the British intelligence service was told by a REAF mechanic at Almaza that the General had been planning a second 'get-away' attempt. Quite how he intended to do so remains a mystery.

A different and more colourful version of these events stated that *Tayyar Awal* Hassan Izzat and perhaps also *Mulazim* Anwar Sadat were in contact with a German intelligence operative named Hussain Ja'afar who was said to be the son of an Egyptian father and a German mother. Whether this was his real name remains unclear as the leading conspirators decided not to inform other sympathisers about him. Instead, connections with Hussain Ja'afar were left to Izzat and Sadat alone. Unfortunately for those concerned, their 'spy' proved to be an unreliable amateur who spent a great deal of time in Cairo nightclubs, was involved in the counterfeiting of Egyptian currency and was far from discreet in his speech. The Egyptian Police were soon on his tail and once arrested, Hussain Ja'afar rapidly gave up the names of his associates. Anwar Sadat and Hassan Izzat were subsequently arrested but unlike the incompetent spy, did not give any further information about like-minded men in the Egyptian Army or Air Force.

This version of events suggested that the Egyptian intelligence service kept the British Advisory Mission informed of what happening, explaining that a leakage of information had initially led to a senior Egyptian staff officer falling under suspicion. However, they stated that further investigation had traced the leak to an escaped German officer prisoner-of-war, a different Egyptian Army officer and an officer from the REAF. Sadat and Izzat were arrested in August and following a military trial, they were cashiered.

What is clear is that on 8 October, a fortnight before the Second Battle of al-Alamain, Anwar Sadat was sent to a relatively comfortable Foreigners Jail near Minya in Upper Egypt. However, two other REAF officers from the original conspiracy remained 'uncovered'. They were Abd al-Latif Baghdadi and Hassan Ibrahim.

In his defence, Hassan Izzat wrote a formal submission, expressing his 'hatred of the Germans for he knew how badly they treated the nations under their domination' and claiming that the German spies had 'made these accusations against him with the intention also of affecting the good relations between Egypt and her ally, Great Britain'. For his part, Aziz al-Masri denied involvement in any plot and a report stated he admitted that, 'he wished to leave Egypt for any other country, preferably America where his wife is at present'. He also asked the Egyptian government to help him sell his property at Ayn Shams, one of Cairo's most historic suburbs so that he could afford the fare.

Flight Lieutenant Hassan Izzat of the REAF and Captain Anwar Sadat of the Egyptian Army were not shot, as the British ambassador had wished but were cashiered and interned. General al-Masri was kept under house arrest followed by close surveillance for the rest of the war. Meanwhile, the British persuaded the Egyptian authorities to intern Prince Abbas Halim and other high-profile figures whom the British mistrusted.

The final days of July 1942 saw a similarily somewhat restrained and limited purge of those seen as potentially troublesome within the ranks of the REAF. Three of the REAF's more senior officers (each of them qualified pilots) were disciplined for not being aware of – or not dealing with – subversive activities and another was placed 'under observation'. Meanwhile 14 officer pilots, 17 NCO pilots and 31 other NCOs were similarly transferred to the Army as a disciplinary measure. All except one (reportedly) would return to the REAF at a later date.

One of those disciplined was *Tayyar Awal* Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid of No. 5 Squadron Another was Hassan Aqif of the Royal Flight who was unusual because the British insisted that he should not be allowed to return to the REAF. In fact, Aqif was only able to return after King Faruq overruled this ban and designated Aqif as his most trusted personal pilot. It has further been suggested that at least one of the senior officers transferred to the Army had been removed for political reasons because he was openly hostile to the current government of Nahas Pasha and the Wafd Party. It is highly likely that the Wafd government seized the opportunity of an investigation into the REAF to carry out some sort of political purge.

The transfers of pilots caused no problems at the time because the REAF already had more pilots than aeroplanes for them to fly, even if the aeroplanes had their magnetos restored. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether this grounding applied to all squadrons for the same length of time as some units like No. 1 Squadron appear to have had no subversion within the ranks. The magnetos were replaced once the purge had been carried out but for the rest of 1942, the REAF's aeroplanes were only allowed fuel for a maximum of one hour's flying time. This at least enabled training to be resumed although at a low level. According to Baghdadi, the aeroplanes with fuel were also 'chained to the hangers columns' when not actually in use.

A consensus gradually emerged within the REAF amongst both officers and men, against what had happened in No. 2 Squadron and against General Aziz al-Masri's attempt to fly out of Egypt without authorisation from the Egyptian government. Most were mainly upset by having their training interrupted but some felt that the honour of their service had been stained by the reckless actions of a few. The divisions thus caused would persist for years.

Outside the REAF, other men were removed from positions of influence including Prince Abbas Halim who was briefly imprisoned. Abbas Halim was astonished and agrieved by this detention as he did not regard himself as a subversive. Indeed, at one point he is said to have suggested to Sir Miles Lampson that he himself, would make a more suitable king than his cousin Faruq. On the other side, some British officials described Prince Abbas Halim as 'very popular but obstinate and stupid' though undoubtedly an Egyptian patriot. Having tried for some years to put himself at the head of organised labour in Egypt, Abbas Halim now found that his popularity was also waning in this arena, largely because he was still a member of the Royal Family.

A continuing lack of available Egyptian official documents from this period probably reflects the fact that the events of 1942 remain divisive. There is also the possibility that involvement in the various plots went higher up the chain of both military and political authority than has been admitted, perhaps even including *Qa'id Janah* (Wing Com.) Abd al-Hamid Sulaiman who was then the senior REAF Staff Officer in the Ministry of Munitions. It has even been suggested that Prime Minister Nahas Pasha himself or his trusted ministerial associate, Hamdi Saif al-Nasr, were not entirely ignorant of what had been going on.

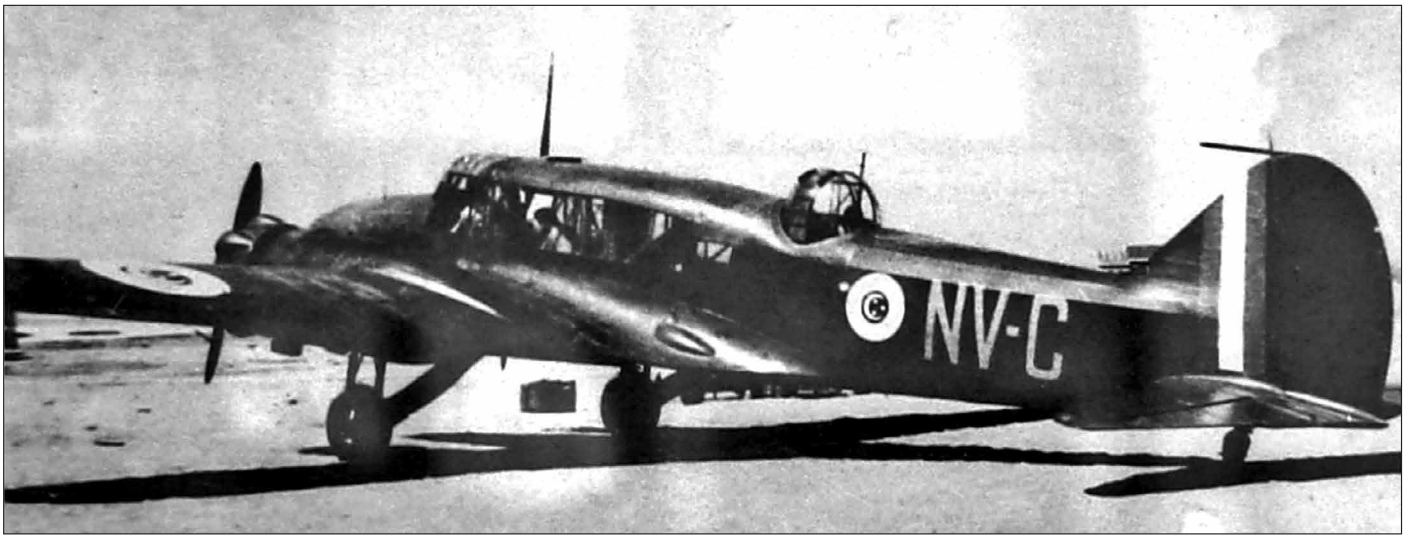
Similarly in Britain, the sensitivity of these events meant that official documents relating to them were not released in the Public Records Office (now the National Archives) until 1994. Clearly, there was some sympathy for the Axis within elements of broader Egyptian society. For example, Italian fighter pilot Capt. Giuseppe Pesola had been captured after his Macchi MC 202 was shot down on 15 March 1942. He then escaped from POW Camp 310 near Suez and spent more than a year hiding in Egypt before being recaptured and sent to Camp 304 at Helwan. Evidently, Capt. Pesola had found one or more sympathetic persons to hide him.

Nevertheless, the impact of this crisis on the Egyptian armed forces should not be exaggerated. The consequences were very mixed. Recruitment to the Army continued, whereas the REAF's Flying Training School did not have a new intake of cadets for a long time. In August, the British handed over an ex-RAF Avro Anson (serial number DJ283) to the REAF, followed by another in September (serial number DG770) but there were fears within the Egyptian Air Force that the British Advisory Mission was using the crisis to settle old scores and perhaps even to reimpose British control. However, suggestions that the RAF 'looted' the REAF's remaining stores are misleading. The RAF was under huge enemy pressure at this time and any spares that the REAF could not currently use would naturally have been diverted for British use and this would have been done with the agreement of the Egyptian government. Yet, there is also no denying that the REAF was in a very poor state by the end of 1942. Nor had the question of subversion within the Egyptian armed forces gone away.

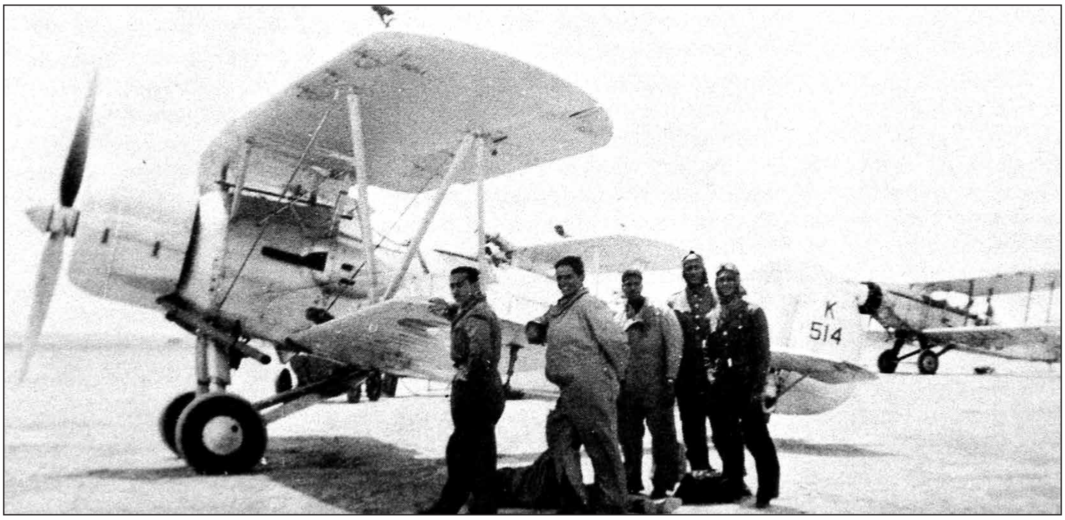
Meanwhile, the desert campaign continued to rage. One of the strangest operations was on the night 13/14 September when the British dropped eight small dummy parachutists which burst into flame (presumably after reaching the ground) and were intended to attract the attention of an Italian garrison. That same night, a motorised battalion of the Sudan Defence Force (called Barforce) set off from Bahariya Oasis and headed west, seemingly intent on attacking Siwa but then turned back. These were clearly diversionary moves or were intended to provoke some action on the part of the Italians. However, all that seems to have happened was some increased Axis air reconnaissance, a brief visit by General Rommel to Siwa and the arrival (by air) of an additional battalion of Italian troops to garrison the small oasis of Qara, 75kms north-west of Siwa on the edge of the Qattara Depression.

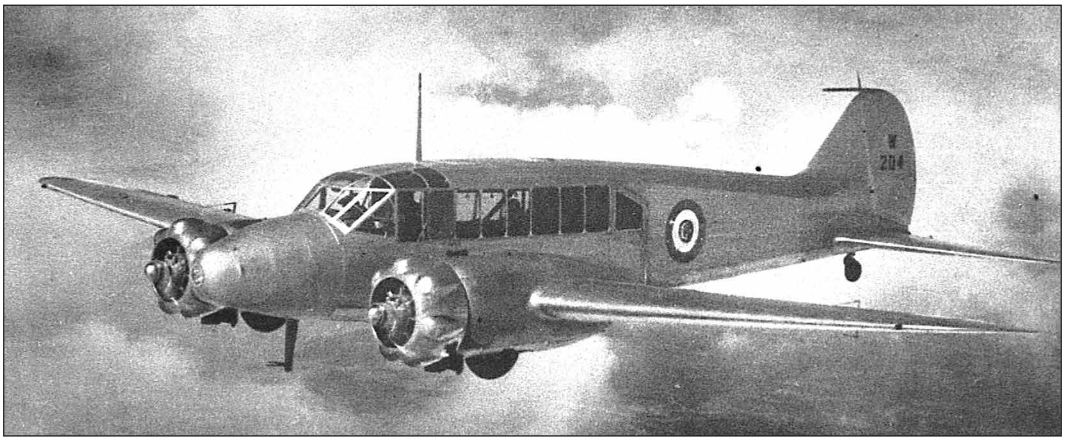
The Second Battle of al-Alamain (23 October to 11 November 1942) was a clear British victory which resulted in Rommel's Afrika Korps and its Italian allies being forced into a retreat. Although hard-fought, this would end with their evacuation of North Africa altogether. In Egypt meanwhile, the Royal Palace and the Egyptian government joined forces to raise Egyptian morale and self-respect by organising a huge celebration to celebrate 1,000 years since the foundation of the world's oldest continuously working university, Al-Azhar in Cairo.

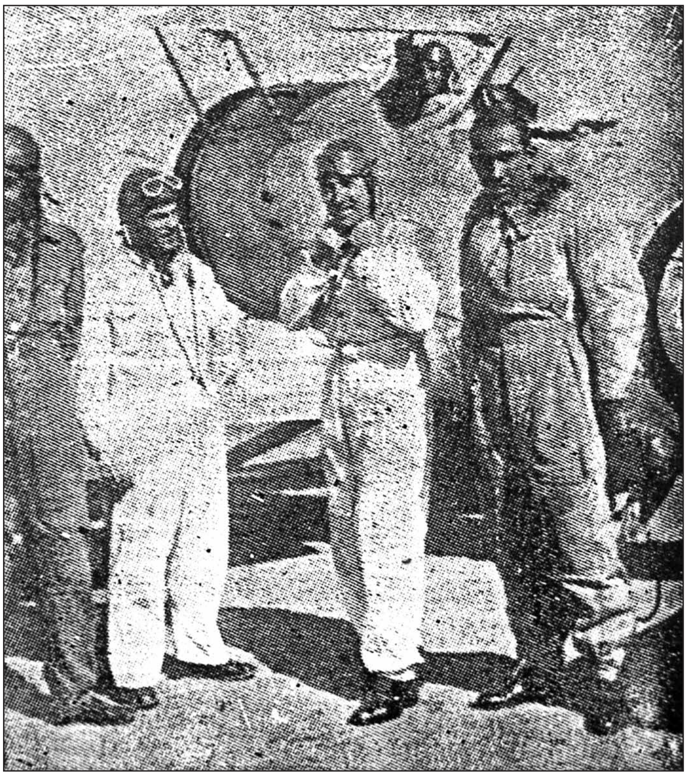
According to British and Egyptian records, October 1942 also saw the strength of the REAF standing at 133 aeroplanes, of which only 47 were reportedly in flying condition. Of this latter figure, no less than 32 were training machines, leaving just 15 operational aircraft divided between six squadrons and a Royal Flight. Average flying time per month for the pilots reportedly ranged between three and seven hours or from 40 to 100 hours per squadron. There had, by now, been changes in the British Advisory Mission where



The only known complete side-view photograph of one of the Avro Ansons of No. 3 Squadron REAF shows that it was given British-style individual code lettering while serving alongside the RAF early in the Second World War. Unfortunately, the serial number of the machine with the individual code NV-C shown here, is unknown, though it would certainly have been in the W--- range. (EAF Museum collection)


The only known photograph of one of the REAF's troublesome Fairey Gordon target-towing aeroplanes shows it in the distance, behind one of the REAF's often photographed Hawker Egyptian Audaxes (K514). Unfortunately, the serial number under the Gordon's wing is illegible. (Author's collection)


The Avro 652 of the REAF's Royal Flight never appears to have been painted a camouflage scheme, remaining silver overall throughout the Second World War. (V.H. Tait collection)


Another view of one of the REAF's Hawker Egyptian Audaxes with aircrews in full flying gear, probably early in the Second World War. (EAF Museum collection)

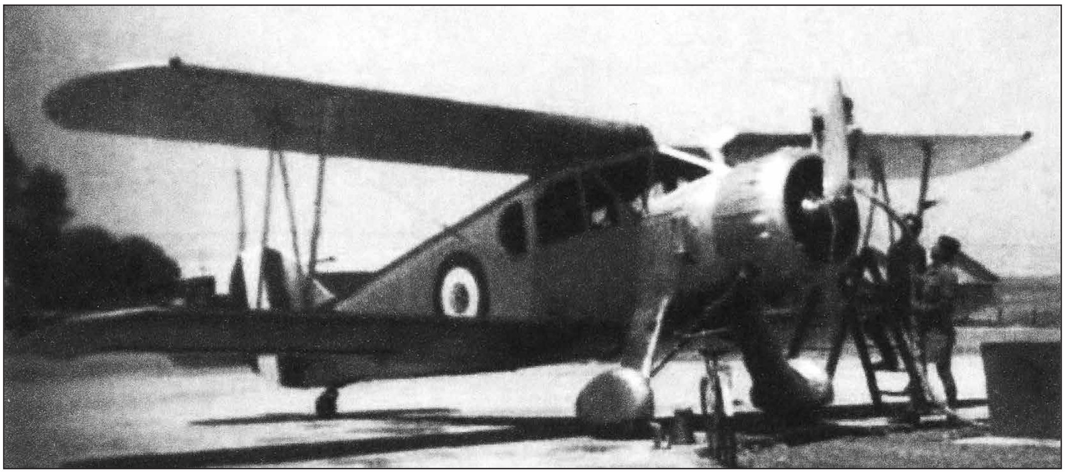
according to its report for the month of October, Squadron Leader F.H. O'Neill was now the Fighter Advisor, Flight Lieutenant L.F. Humphrey being the Air Training Advisor while Fl/Officer J.R. Mitchell was the Engineer Advisor.

In various memoirs written after the war by Egyptian officers who later rose to political prominence, the 'revolutionaries' as they called themselves, gave up hope of getting help from the Axis powers following the Second Battle of al-Alamain. In November 1942, they suspended their subversive activities. Everything seemed to be changing at breakneck speed, both politically and on the battlefield.

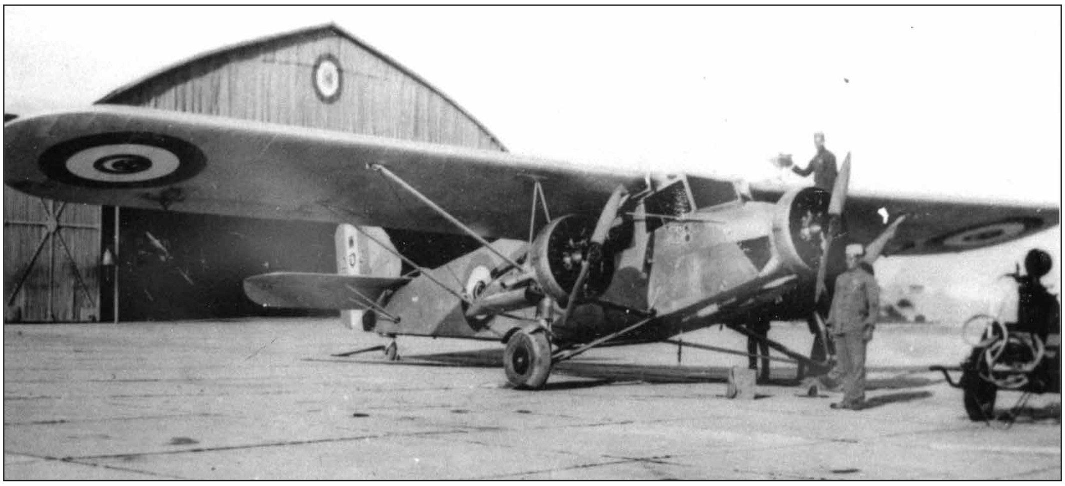
During the afternoon of 14 November, men from the British Army's 1 Royal Sussex Regiment reoccupied Siwa Oasis from which the Italian garrison had withdrawn six days earlier. The Italians had also left some of their own rations for the local Siwi Berber inhabitants who were in danger of running out of food. The locals did have sufficient supplies of tea which, having previously been captured from the British by the German Army, had then been given to the people of Siwa by General Rommel when he visited the oasis in the aftermath of the British dropping of 'incendiary parachutists' (see above). Some of this tea was then used to welcome the British soldiers of the 1st Royal Sussex Regiment. Glasses of hot and very sweet tea continued to be offered to visitors, unexpected or otherwise, when the author visited Siwa in the summer of 1964.

The latter part of 1942 saw a new cohort of cadets entering the Egyptian Army's Military College. Amongst them was a youngster who, having to wait until the end of 1947 before he could go to the Flying Training School, would thereafter play a notable role in the Egyptian Air Force during the Palestine War of 1948–9. Also in the Suez War of 1956, he would find himself in Jordan cut off from his colleagues during the June War of 1967 and then be placed in command of the UARAF (as it was then known) in November 1967. His name was Mustafa Shalabbi al-Hinnawi and in the aftermath of the disastrous Six Days War of June 1967, his orders were to rebuild the country's shattered air force. Back in late 1942, al-Hinnawi found that one of his first instructors at the Military College was Gamal Abd al-Nasser, the future President of Egypt. Here is a quote directly from Air Marshal Mustafa Shalabbi al-Hinnawi's own unpublished account of those days:

> We [Hinnawi and his fellow cadets] were Cohort Number 14 [the fourteenth class to join the Military College which accepted two



For a number of years the REAF's solitary Avro 641 Commodore, which had been purchased from the Egyptian Air Force's first Director, Victor Hubert Tait, and given the serial number W203, remained in silver dope. Only after a major overhaul and engine replacement would this aircraft be repainted in a camouflage scheme. (Author's collection)



The REAF's now time-worn Westland Wessex (number W202) outside the main hanger at Almaza during the Second World War. The sleeping quarters of the resident British Advisory Mission officers were immediately behind this hanger, while the officers of the REAF's Technical Schools were a few hundred metres away. (EAF Museum collection)

such entries per year]. Here I ask permission from the reader to shed some light on the process to prepare this cohort from the time they joined the Military Academy until they reached the battlefield at Arish Airport in late 1948 [during the Palestine War], so that the [Egyptian] young men understand the situation in Egypt in general and in the armed forces in particular, including the Air Force. It includes both comedy and neglect: 1) In 1942 the Military Academy announced the induction of a new cohort; 2) Students who had completed high school applied and underwent the medical exam, some were accepted and others rejected; 3) Suddenly there was another announcement from the Military Academy to induct another cohort of students who had achieved the General Knowledge Certificate [one year before completing high school]; 4) It came to our knowledge that this cohort would be very small and will be limited to a few lucky individuals who had not yet received the High School Certificate; 5) I applied to this cohort with my school colleagues Muhammad Amin Ayyub and Ahmad Samaha and we were sure we would not be accepted. But what we considered to be a joke became a reality and we were accepted along with 150 others; 6) I was shocked to find myself accepted into the Military Academy as I ranked fifth over the entire Kingdom [of Egypt] in the General Knowledge Certificate. In fact, I had dreamed of one day going to medical school, having been influenced by my uncle, the late Dr. Abd al-Rahman al-Hinnawi. At that same time, I was impressed neither by the current leaders of the [Egyptian] forces, nor by what they were doing, because everything seemed merely parades such as the ceremonial sending of the Holy Convoy [carrying the Mahmal textile covering for the Ka'aba in the Great Mosque in Mecca], not to mention the low academic level of these leaders but I resigned myself to the facts.

December 1942 saw the Egyptian government introduce a new draft law which anticipated complete national service conscription. This upset the British because it included Sudanese living in Egypt. The Egyptian authorities regarded them as Egyptian subjects at a time when the British had undoubtedly been trying to wrestle Sudan away from Egypt and establish it as a separate country.

On 21 December, Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary and the future Prime Minister of Great Britain who took his country into the shameful Tripartite Invasion of Egypt in 1956, wrote a memorandum on the role of the Egyptian government in 1942. This he described as 'sensible and loyal', noting the Egyptian armed forces were now 'more healthy' than at any time since the outbreak of the Second World War.

For its part, the British Advisory Mission reported an atmosphere of shame and resentment in the REAF against those who had defected while many of those who had previously sympathised with the 'Secret Organisation' felt that the defectors had overstepped the mark. In general, the crisis sparked little resentment against the British in the Army and REAF where there was a widespread feeling that the British accusations contained more than a little truth. Nevertheless, the Egyptian officer corps was upset by having to 'wash its dirty linen in public'.

Amongst various administrative and structural changes within the REAF, the aerodrome at Almaza was reorganised as one unit rather than two, as had previously been the case. Its command would also be directly responsible for Dakhailah aerodrome outside Alexandria. On the other hand, the Advisory Mission was having difficulty finding suitably experienced RAF men who had the diplomatic or personal skills needed for service in its ranks. Nevertheless, the distinctly more helpful attitude of the British towards the REAF contributed towards an improvement in morale, especially as Grp. Capt. (acting Air Commodore) John Stanley Chick was now chief of the RAF Section in the British Advisory Mission. A fighter ace from the First World War with 16 victories to his credit, 'Johnny' Chick, proved to be a true ally of the Egyptian officers as they struggled to rebuild their country's air force.

Despite the best efforts of both the REAF and the Advisory Mission, training remained a problem even though much of the REAF's outdated equipment was now only suitable for the training role. Indeed, an official report of 21 December 1942 pointed to an almost complete lack of modern equipment and spare parts. The work of the advisory officers was described as 'depressing' whilst a lack of enthusiasm on the part of some Egyptian personnel was 'understandable'. A complete overhaul of the disciplinary structure was also regarded as the most urgent task. The December 1942 Advisory Mission Report gave the number of REAF pilots as 121 officers and 17 NCOs.

Another major improvement as far as the Egyptian were concerned, was a British agreement to supply spares directly from RAF Middle East stocks. Whereas previously all requests had been directed to London, this had clearly not been an efficient way of proceeding in a war situation. While a small number of 'excess' spares were transferred back to the RAF, the REAF's acute shortage of 'red dope' for its fabric-covered aeroplanes was solved.

Far away in the Atlantic, the merchant ship *Star of Suez* (aboard which Abd al-Hamid's father had been when he signed his son's identity card as a REAF cadet back in 1939), was sunk by the German submarine U-159 on 15 December 1942. The entire crew survived except one man. One of the ship's officers also died of exhaustion before their lifeboats reached safety in Brazil with 40 men on board. The *Star of Suez's* cargo had also included aircraft spare parts and she was sailing to Suez from New York via Trinidad and Cape Town. Whether these lost spares had been intended for the RAF or the REAF is unknown.

There had been very few accidents (other than those concerning Hurricanes) and none had been serious. A significant proportion of the REAF's aeroplanes had been permanently grounded until they could be completely overhauled. This included all the Fairey Gordons and the Westland Wessex. The Advisory Mission's December Report gave the strength of the REAF without indicating how many of each type were currently serviceable. This now stood at 16 Avro 626s, one De Havilland Moth, 15 'Egyptian' Audaxes (of both Marks), 34 Miles Magisters, one Avro 641, one Avro 652, one Avro Anson (apparently not including the two recently transferred ex-RAF Ansons), 14 Westland Lysanders, 30 Gloster Gladiators, two Percival Q6s, 12 Hawker Hart Trainers and six Hawker Hurricane Mk.Is.

4

LOCAL INVOLVEMENT IN AIR OPERATION IN OTHER ARAB LANDS (JULY 1941 – DECEMBER 1942)

Although the Second World War effectively halted any further development of the Saudi Arabian Air Force, this continued to exist – at least in theory. In fact, the outbreak of the Second World War had little impact upon Saudi Arabia other than interrupting trade and making the seas around Arabia more dangerous. However, the collapse of Italy's East African empire may have led King Sa'ud of Saudi Arabia to abandon his country's previously close relationship with Italy in aviation matters. However, whether the unintended Italian bombing of Dhahran in Saudi Arabia on 19 October 1940 had an influence upon King Sa'ud decision to give his two civilian, two tri-motor Caproni Ca.101bis aircraft to Britain in 1942, is unknown.

What is clear is that Saudi Arabia's two Caproni Ca.101bis aircraft were indeed, offered to the United Kingdom and the British government accepted this remarkable offer. A team of RAF officers was sent to Jiddah to inspect the three-engined machines and in May 1942, one of them (apparently still wearing its original Italian civil registration of I-ABCK) was at the RAF's No. 103 Maintenance Unit at Abu Qir in Egypt. The aeroplane was reportedly, still flying in October 1943 although what eventually happened to it remains unknown. There seems to be no confirmation that it was ever formally taken over by the RAF or indeed, by the REAF but it may have been the unspecified Caproni that the RAF accepted and gave the serial number HK914 on 31 January 1943. However, it is also possible that this mystery aeroplane was an entirely different Caproni which had escaped from Italian East Africa to Saudi Arabia when the Italian colonies fell to the British in late 1941. From then until after the Second World War, the Saudi Arabian Air Force had no operational aircraft and thus, ceased to exist as an operational force. Meanwhile, despite pressure from a variety of quarters, Saudi Arabia maintained its neutrality to the end of the world conflict.

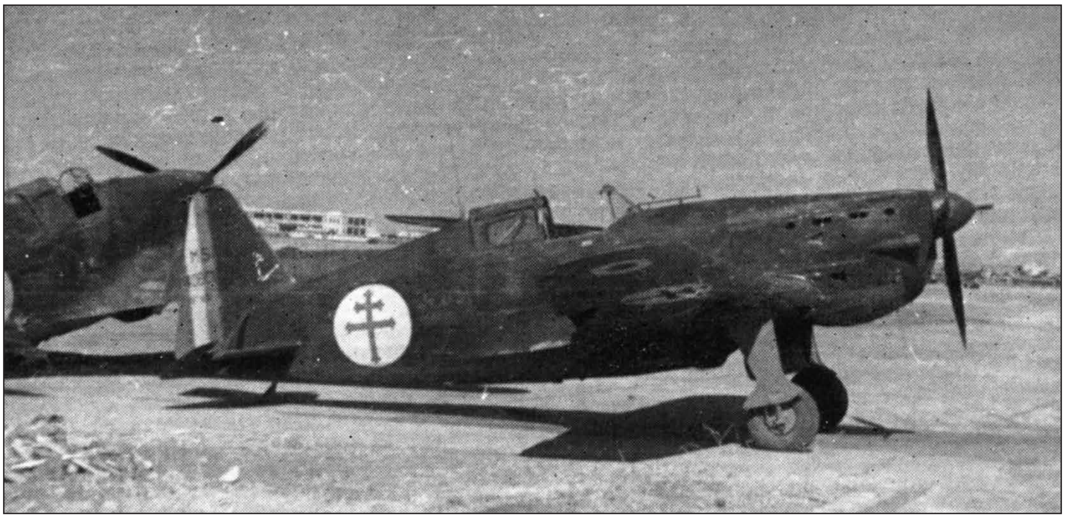
Circumstances in French ruled Arab areas varied considerably. Several would be the scene of considerable fighting with Allied landings in Algeria and Morocco from November 1942 to May 1943. In fact, the North Africa Campaign came to its bitterly fought end in the nominally French protectorate of Tunisia in May 1943.

In the Levant, Syria and Lebanon would also see serious campaigns as the British expelled the Vichy French authorities (8 June to 14 July 1941). Fighting in the latter areas would have some influence upon the later creation of both the Syrian and Lebanese Air Forces. This was not least because the locally recruited junior officers of the *Troupes Speciales* consisted of men who had graduated from the Military Academy established by the French in Damascus in November 1920 and located in Hims since 1932. Several of these (increasingly) experienced Syrian and Lebanese officers would still be in service when the indigenous units were transferred to newly independent Lebanon and Syria after the Second World War.

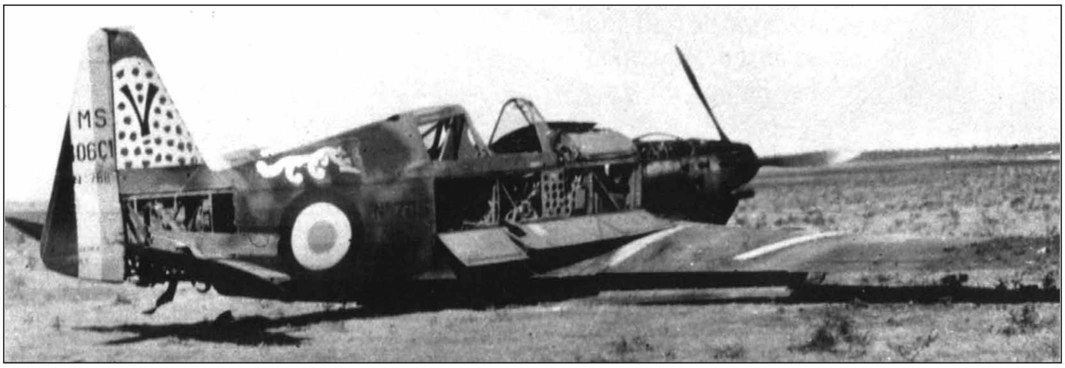
More immediately however, the defeat of the so-called Rashid Ali Rebellion in Iraq enabled the British to turn their attention to Vichy-controlled Syria and Lebanon, through which German and Italian air units had passed in their unsuccessful attempt to shore up the government of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani (Kaylani) in Iraq.

Initially, the RAF's activities consisted of reconnaissance flights over Syria and Lebanon. Fearing some sort of more direct British military action, the Vichy authorities in the Levant requested reinforcements and so some French Armée de l'Air units were sent from Algeria to Syria. Eventually, the Armée de l'Air in Syria's estimated 92 combat aeroplanes were increased to over 150 in early June 1941 and eventually, almost 280. On the British side, there had been a comparable build-up.

The British offensive to take control of Syria and Lebanon started when three Blenheim medium bombers attacked Aleppo aerodrome early on 3 June 1941. The pilots saw a number of Italian aeroplanes on the ground; these being machines that the Regia Aeronautica had been obliged to abandon during its retreat from the Iraqi campaign. The following day, an RAF Hurricane of No. 208 Squadron on reconnaissance over the Aleppo area was attacked by Morane Saulnier MS.406s fighters of Armée de l'Air squadron GCI/7 and was damaged. The opposing British and French airmen had been allies back in 1939 and 1940. The invasion of Vichy-governed Syria by



While British and Imperial troops were fighting "alone" against the Axis armies in Egypt, and were viewing Egyptian Armed forces with increasing mistrust, they received a morale-raising boost with the arrival of French airmen and their aeroplanes from Syria and Lebanon. After the Vichy administration in Syria and Lebanon had been ousted by a British invasion in June-July 1941, some French airmen returned to France while others joined what was becoming the Free French Air Force in Egypt. For example, this Free French Morane-Saulnier MS 406 was attached to the RAF's No. 274 Squadron (M. Kerr collection)



A Morane Saulnier MS 406 1 Esc. GC 1/7 (serial number 788) which is said to have crash-landed at Rayaq aerodrome in Lebanon during the Syrian campaign of June-July 1941. The aircraft of this unit had their individual numbers painted on their tails in Arabic numerals, in this case number 7. However, the dark spots on the white background do not appear on all the Morane Saulnier MS 406s of this Escadrille. (P. Cortet photograph, via Pierre Antoinne)

British, Australian, Indian and Free French forces began during the morning of 8 June with three thrusts northwards, pushing towards Damascus, Rayaq and Beirut from Transjordan and Palestine, supported by the Royal Navy's 15 Cruiser Squadron. Facing them were around 35,000 French colonial and Foreign Legion troops.

The story of the resulting brief air war over Syria and Lebanon had little to do with the local Arab population. However, it involved a number of quite serious air clashes, including one over Damascus in which a Morane Saulnier MS.406 of GCIII/6 downed a Hurricane of No. 208 Squadron on the first day. There was greater action off the coast of Lebanon and Syria, involving clashes between the bombers and fighters of both sides. Dogfights between RAF Hurricanes and French Dewoitine D.520s saw successes on both sides on 9 June. On 12th June, Blenheim bombers of the RAF's No. 11 Squadron attacked Beirut harbour. German aircraft also became involved in support of the Vichy French with around eight Ju 88 bombers from the Luftwaffe's LG1 trying to bomb the Royal Navy's 15 Cruiser Squadron. However, Tomahawks of the No. 3 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) based at Haifa in Palestine, intercepted them and three Junkers were claimed as shot down.

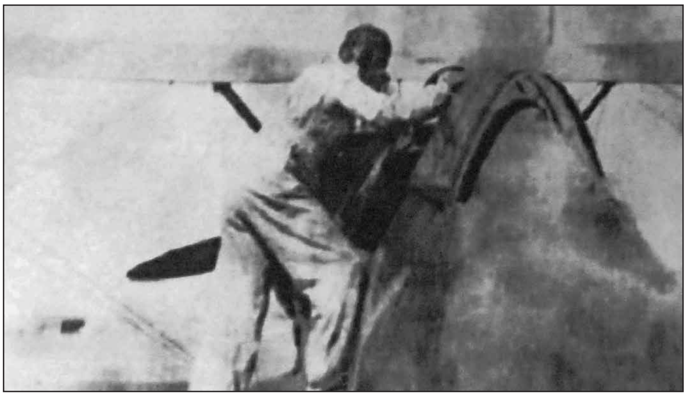
Late on 14 June, Vichy forces launched a counter-offensive with air support and obliged the allies to retreat from Qunaitra on the Golan Heights. This would later to be the scene of bitter fighting between Israeli and Syrian forces in 1967 and 1973. In fact, the unexpectedly determined resistance put up by Vichy French forces in both Syria and Lebanon, caused the British to order Transjordanian Arab Legion units (currently in Iraq) to join the struggle in Syria. Their task was to take the oasis of Palmyra with its famous Nabataean and Roman ruins.

Meanwhile, British air reinforcements arrived with X Flight, a temporary unit consisting of Gloster Gladiators from No. 94 Squadron which was sent to Amman in the Transjordan. Having promptly been thrown into the fray, six of these Gladiators had a somewhat unexpected success against six D.520s of GCIII/6 near al-Kiswa south of Damascus. Despite losing one machine shot down and another damaged, the Gladiators claimed three of the opposing Dewoitines which were less manoeuvrable, although faster. Two of the damaged D.520s made forced landings in the area. This victory was repeated on 18 June with two Dewoitine D.520s of GCIII/6 again falling to X Flight's Gladiators, this time with no loss to the British.

Damascus was taken three days later. The RAF and its allies now tried to remove a threat to the British advance by attacking a number of Vichy-held airfields. There was some bitter air fighting as the Vichy Armée de l'Air tried to defend its bases with losses on both sides. The Vichy air units were nevertheless still being reinforced from other Vichy-held territory. From an early stage, the air campaign over Syria, Lebanon and the coastal waters had seen the involvement of opposing American-built Tomahawk fighters in British and Commonwealth service and American-built Martin 167F bombers (known in British service as Marylands) in Vichy French service. These were in combat against each other on several occasions with a number of Martin 167Fs being shot down by Curtiss P-40 Tomahawks.

While Vichy forces continued to put up stiff resistance, Transjordanian Arab Legion troops headed to the smaller oasis of al-Sukhnah between Palmyra and the Euphrates. Here, they were given air cover by four Gladiators and four Hurricanes from No. 127 Squadron based at Habbaniya in Iraq. During the final days of June and the 2nd of July, Vichy units besieged in Palmyra were supplied from the air by the old Potez 25TOE reconnaissance biplanes of EO 595. However, the garrison at the oasis had to surrender on 2 July.

Fighting continued in central, northern and eastern Syria but it was increasingly clear that Vichy forces could not retain control of Syria and Lebanon. Their air units therefore began withdrawing to the Italian ruled Aegean island of Rhodes. Following armistice negotiations, the Syria-Lebanon Campaign came to an end



An Egyptian fighter pilot getting into the cockpit of his Gloster Gladiator at an unknown date. The presence of the large identification code letter Y on the side of the fuselage probably shows this to be one of the machines used by No. 2 Squadron REAF from 1940 to 1942. (EAF Museum collection)

Egyptian pilots study a map while leaning on the lower wing of one of their Gloster Gladiators. They are probably from No. 2 Squadron (EAF Museum collection)

A REAF pilot identified as Ahmad Sa'udi Abu Ali; probably the Gladiator pilot Ahmad Sa'udi Hussain Abu Ali who tried to take a message across the front line in the Western Desert and was shot down by Lt. Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt on 7th July 1941. (Author's collection)

immediately after midnight on 12th July 1941. Thereafter, the surviving Vichy air units withdrew from the Middle East with most French military personnel opting to return to France rather than join the Free French forces led by General De Gaulle.

The only fighter unit in the newly-formed *Forces Aériennes Françaises Libres* (Free French Air Force), the *Première Escadrille de Chasse* (E.F.C.1), now moved to Lebanon. Here it was based at Rayaq in the Biqa'a valley where it continued training on Hawker Hurricanes under Colonel Martial Valin.

Later in the year, E.F.C.1 was dissolved and its personnel were assigned to a new and larger unit established at the start of September 1941 at Rayaq. Given the name Groupe de Chasse Alsace, it consisted of two squadrons, one of which was the Strasbourg Escadrille composed of the previous E.F.C.1. French pilots. Ground crews came from Egypt and Britain to strengthen this new Free French Group which continued to train on assorted French aeroplanes gathered from a variety of airfields. This included Morane Saulnier MS.406, Dewoitine D.520, Potez 25, Potez 29 and Curtiss P-36 Hawk.

Local technicians and ground personnel had played little role in this conflict because the French avoided recruiting local men to technical roles in the Armée de l'Air as they regarded them as politically unreliable whether they were Muslim, Christian or other. However, this policy resulted in there being very few technically qualified personnel in Syria although there were slightly more in Lebanon.

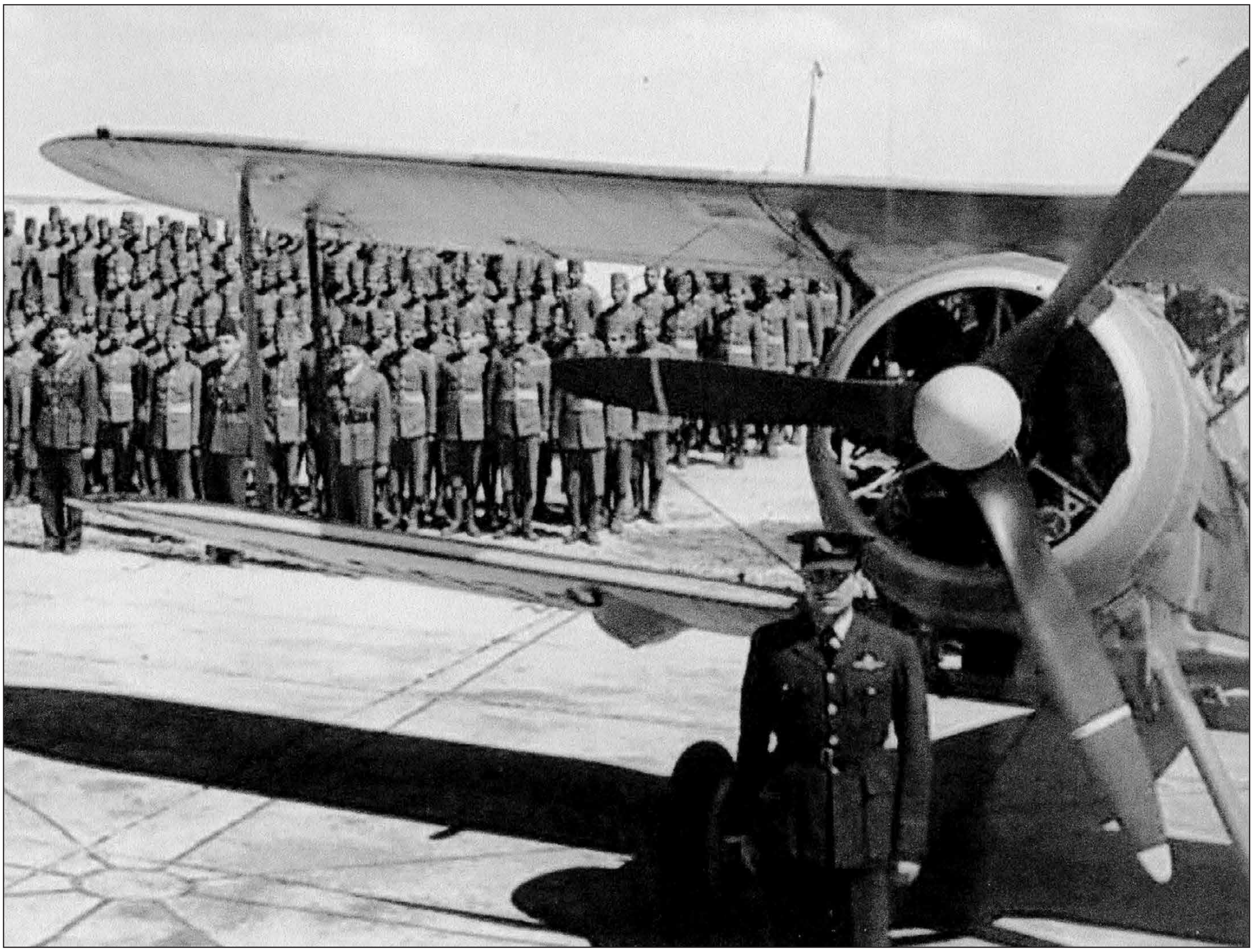
Meanwhile, the British found a variety of civilian aeroplanes, as well as military, when they took over Lebanon and Syria. The latter included a Caudron Aiglon, a Caudron Phalene, a Caudron Simoun, a Potez 637, two Caudron Lucioles and three machines whose type were not recorded – although one was probably a Whitney Straight with registration F-AREQ.

Despite the deep-seated mistrust and fear of local personnel on the part of the French Armée de l'Air in the Levant, some of its units had great pride in their local connections – at least with Lebanon. This was reflected in a particularly enigmatic (although seemingly unofficial) escadrille insignia adopted by the first Free French flyers based at Rayaq. It combined the famous French Cross of Lorraine with a Cedar of Lebanon. One variation also included a radiant sun, emblematic of the rebirth of France under Free French leadership with the Latin motto *'Hic veniant omnes'* (They all come here). This reflected a hope that all freedom-loving Frenchmen would join them.

The Allied campaign to remove the Vichy French authorities from Lebanon and Syria was not a liberation in the proper sense of the word. Foreign Vichy French authority was merely replaced by a mixture of equally foreign Free French and British authority. A little over two years after the Syria-Lebanon campaign, the Lebanese parliament reformed the country's constitution by removing or suppressing those articles which had, before the war and under French pressure, limited Lebanese sovereignty. The Free French authorities had, in practice, inherited the pre-war League of Nations mandate system over both Lebanon and Syria. They now promptly shelved the entire Lebanese constitution and arrested the leading Lebanese politicians who had brought about the recent changes.

Protests by the Egyptian and Iraqi government had no real effect but intervention by the British and Americans did. As a result, General De Gaulle, the leader of the Free French movement and part of the old French colonial empire which had been wrested from Vichy French control, felt obliged to restore the Lebanese government and parliament. The crisis had been temporarily defused but had not gone away and would reignite almost immediately after the end of the Second World War.

In Syria meanwhile, a number of nationalist leaders who had once indicated their sympathy for the Axis powers because they were enemies of France, were now persuaded to support the British – though not, it seems, the Free French authorities. In July 1941,



A Gloster Gladiator of No. 5 Squadron during a parade which probably marked this unit becoming a fully operational squadron of the REAF. Note that the machine still has its serial number written in large lettering beneath the lower wing in pre-war RAF style. (EAF Museum collection)

the British and Free French signed an agreement in Beirut whereby Britain would have strategic control over Syria while French forces maintained internal security, law and order.

The only other French colonial territory in this part of the world did not and still does not, strictly form part of the Arab World. This was Djibouti or as it was then known, French Somaliland. Its affairs were closely bound up with its Arab and African neighbours – especially those of British-ruled Aden. French forces based in this small territory squeezed between Italian East Africa and British Somaliland, had cooperated with British forces in British Somaliland and the Aden Protectorate until the armistice of 24 June 1940 took France out of the war (see Volume Five).

During 1941 and 1942, the French enclave of Djibouti remained under Vichy French authority – even during the British conquest of neighbouring Italian East Africa.

Thereafter, it remained effectively isolated and blockaded. During this tense period two large transport aircraft flew difficult supply missions. There were also 11 Potez 25 TOE in Djibouti during 1941, six being operational with five in reserve which would be used against both the British and Free French. In January 1942, two Potez 25 bombed and strafed Allied forces which had infiltrated the territory of Djibouti.

Following the Allied invasion of French territories in North Africa, the German Army took over previously unoccupied southern France. The Vichy French government continued to exist but to all intents and purposes, became a puppet of the Axis powers. Attitudes in Djibouti now started to change and on 5 December 1942, Adjutants Lebat and Eichenbaum took one of the Potez 25s (number 1525) and deserted (or escaped, depending upon your point of view) to Diredawa in what was now British-occupied Ethiopia.

On 29 December, the French civilian and military authorities in Djibouti at last broke from the Vichy government and declared their adherence to the Free French cause. Three days later on 1 January 1943, General Legentilhomme of the Free French Army, entered Djibouti. The remaining Potez 25 TOEs which his men found there, were formed into an escadrille of the FAFL and some were reportedly still flying in 1944.

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